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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19: THE LEARNING OF MIDDLE-LEVEL LEADERS

Dissertation

by

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With Anne R. Clark, Sara K. Hosmer, Meredith Erickson

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Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had major implications on the work educational leaders do on a daily basis, including frequently attending to health and well-being matters as well as operations in order to ensure the safety of all community members. At the same time, school leaders are tasked with maintaining a focus on instructional leadership to close opportunity gaps that may have been exasperated due to the pandemic. One way to increase sustained improvement efforts is to maximize the impact of Middle-level Instructional Leaders (MILs) within the district. Yet, research on MILs is grim and rarely attends to cultivation of learning for these varying roles. In order to address this gap in research, the purpose of this study is to understand how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis. Through an analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews, two observations and a document review, this qualitative case study presents the perspectives of MILs within a single district, capturing a description of two Communities of Practice (CoPs): District MILs and school-based MILs. Findings indicate that MILs' individual investment on vision and goals can supersede that of hierarchical accountability structures. In addition, the social-emotional well-being of students and teachers was an emergent and conflicting priority with instructional leadership. Workplace

experiences and collaborative, experiential practices are amongst the exemplary practices that develop the capacity of MILs. However, limited enrollment capacity, lack of frequency of experiences, and ambiguous role expectations hinder the ability to develop the practice of MILs. These findings have implications for how to best maximize MILs to pursue instructional leadership, and identify additional areas to consider for future research.

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Dedication

To all my family, especially my mother, aunt, grandmother, Bella, and Levi,

I hope I made you proud.

To my best friend Jessica, 22 years and counting, thank you.

And finally, to all the first-generation college students, if I can do it so can you!

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CHAPTER ONE[1]

Introduction

Many empirical studies examine change in schools and districts. Few, however, focus specifically on responses to crisis situations (Smawfield, 2013). Moreover, a wide variety of situations are often labeled crises (Hannah et al., 2009), as if all disruptive events are homogeneous (Bass, 2008). One-time tragic events, such as the death of a community member or an incident of violence, cause significant pain and disruption over a relatively shorter period of time (Shultz et al., 2014). In contrast, a crisis refers to something that strains capacity and has the potential for massive and long-term physical, psychological, and/or material consequences for both the learning organization and the members within it (Hannah et al., 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that presents a number of challenges for educators, chief among them the urgency of addressing instructional gaps. Early research indicates that temporary school closures and reduced instruction time will lead to reduced educational achievement, both in the short and long term, and the negative impacts are disproportionately affecting historically marginalized students (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Eyles et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

While educational leaders should always be learning as their contexts change, crises require rapid learning. The research that is emerging during COVID-19 also suggests that, consistent with previous research on schooling during crises, the level of collaboration and the nature of interaction in the community is a key indicator of a learning community's ability to address these instructional challenges (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). In a qualitative study of school

[1] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne R. Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, Mario Pires.

leaders from across the United States and in nine other countries during COVID-19, McLeod and Dulsky (2021) conclude that connections among educators, and the learning opportunities created by those connections, are vital: "[A] principal, summed it up when she said, 'If this [pandemic] has done nothing else, [it has shown us that] we need to work together in a connected world and leverage our shared brilliance, our shared experience'"(p. 10). Understanding professional learning of educational leaders during a crisis is thus critical to build capacity for practices that meet the needs of students and create sustained improvement (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Smith & Riley 2012; Mutch 2015).

Crises spur rapid social change. Rapid social change requires rapid learning, and adult learners dealing with new problems are required to be (or to become) extremely effective learners (Tusting & Barton, 2003). If the investments that districts make in adult learning during crises are to have measurable impact for practice, we must better understand how adult learning that supports instruction actually takes place. The purpose of this group study is to understand how leadership is linked to learning through "vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people" (Hallinger, 2011, p.129), specifically during COVID-19. We seek to identify how districts can best design for professional learning when going through a period of fundamental uncertainty.

Our study investigates professional learning and instructional leadership by understanding a district as a whole through individual layers within the organization (Figure 1.1). We answer two overarching research questions highlighted in the center of the figure:

- During a time of crisis, what do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district?

- How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?

Each member of our research team then focuses more specifically on different roles and relationships within a district, as shown in the questions surrounding the center of the figure. Our study seeks to understand the interactions and interdependencies among the learning experiences of different educators within a district responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in other words how learning and instructional leadership are bounded (have defined boundaries) and intertwined (have interconnection across boundaries).

Figure 1.1:

Group and Individual Research Questions

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Hosmer:
During a time of crisis,
1) What influences teacher professional learning and instructional practices?
2) What role do principals play in creating the conditions for this learning?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pires:
How do middle-level instructional leaders pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis?</td><td>CORE Research Questions:

During a time of crisis,
● What do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district?
● How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?</td><td>Erickson:
During a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Clark:
During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction?</td></tr>
</table>

Prior research has established that effective leadership for learning adapts and responds to the changing conditions of the organization over time (Hallinger, 2011; Fullan, 2020; Senge, 1990; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Heifetz, 1994). If districts and schools successfully design for learning for educators during a crisis, they will not only navigate the crisis, they will be better able to support educators to make a meaningful impact on student outcomes.

Literature Review

As our study explores the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership, our review of the literature centers on these two concepts. We structure this literature review in three sections. We first present a view of professional learning informed by social learning theory and compare that approach to an organizational learning understanding, looking specifically at the limitations of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept. We then review the literature that establishes that professional learning can be a vehicle for improvement when it is designed in a way that is effective for learning, incorporating opportunities for interaction among educators and including both formal and informal opportunities for learning. Finally, we review the literature on instructional leadership, focusing on three areas: research that establishes shared or distributed models of leadership, the demonstrated impact of instructional leadership, and the emerging research on instructional leadership during crisis.

Learning as a Social Endeavor

Humans learn and develop behaviors by interacting with others. Previously thought to be an individual pursuit, learning has been described as a social endeavor beginning with Bandura (1977). Bandura's work on Social Learning Theory helped to inform exploration of how learning works within groups of people. According to a National Academies of Sciences (2018) report, this shift from an individual understanding of learning to a social understanding represents "one

of the most important recent theoretical shifts in education research" (p. 27). Synthesizing current theory, the report holds that

> [l]earning is a dynamic, ongoing process that is simultaneously biological and cultural. Attention to both individual factors (such as... interests and motivations), as well as factors external to the individual (such as the environment in which the learner is situated, social and cultural contexts, and opportunities available to learners) is necessary to develop a complete picture of the nature of learning" (p. 9).

Following this research on learning as a social endeavor, our study seeks to develop an understanding of learning amongst educators that is influenced by both individual and external factors. For example, our study looks at internal factors, such as educators' perceptions of their identities as learners, and external factors, such as policies that affect instructional leadership or the degree of autonomy permitted in the district.

Limitations of Professional Learning Communities

Social learning theory and consideration of both individual and external factors is not the only way researchers have analyzed how learning amongst educational leaders builds capacity for change and for sustained improvement efforts (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). Dufour and Eaker (1998) originated the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) as groups of educators who foster "mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. xii). The PLC model draws from Senge's (1990) learning organization theory and focuses on the critical roles that leadership and school culture play in professional learning. This model also tends to gravitate toward school renewal, school

reform, and nurturing teams that will contribute to high levels of student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2004).

The PLC model has considerable popularity amongst practitioners, and many have found it useful as they work to support the development of teams (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). However, viewing learning through a PLC model has significant limitations, particularly as it relates to the focus of our study within Frederick. One limitation of the PLC model relates to the roles with which the model is associated. Studies tend to address principal and teacher PLCs but neglect other key stakeholders in the educational sector. In a quantitative study of 212 educators in Finland, which investigated the implementation of PLCs through school culture, leadership, teaching, and professional development, Antinluoma et al. (2018) acknowledged that their data collection limited their findings. The data collection was geared specifically towards the teaching staff and the authors recognized the need to investigate the perceptions of other members who play a critical role in promoting learning within schools. In addition, Dufour and Eaker (1998) and Hord (2004) both focused on actions of the principal, neglecting the perspective of middle-level instructional leaders, district-level leaders, and others. Given that our study incorporates all of these critical stakeholders, the PLC model's narrow vantage point is too exclusionary for our study.

Another limitation of the PLC model pertains to its understanding of how knowledge is developed and disseminated across members of a community. Comparing and contrasting three PLC models with three CoPs, Blankenship and Ruona (2007) posited that "work needs to be done to construct a more complete framework for professional learning communities that acknowledges and supports both the formal and informal learning that takes place at the individual, group, and organization level" (p.7). Because we seek to analyze how learning is

bounded and intertwined amongst leaders within the district, the framework that we use must allow for collection of formal and informal nuances of learning.

Professional Learning

Given the limitations of professional learning communities as a framework for our inquiry, we instead turn to professional learning. The terms *professional development* and *professional learning* are often used interchangeably. In this study we make a distinction between *professional development*, a singular event or an activity that has little follow-up and little effect on educators' growth or understanding (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015), and *professional learning*, learning that is sustained over a period of time (Desimone, 2009). Our research focuses on the latter.

Professional Learning as a Vehicle for Improvement

Effective adult professional learning experiences have long been understood to advance individual, school, and district improvement efforts (Peurach et al., 2019). For that reason, professional learning has been a key element within education reform. Both educational policy (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act) and reports (e.g., the 2004 Teaching Commission Report) include professional learning as a lever to impact student outcomes (Borko, 2004). The resulting accountability structures create a climate in which schools are "urged to learn faster than ever before to deal effectively with the growing pressures of a rapidly changing environment" (Kools & Stoll, 2016, p. 15).

However, research demonstrates that designed professional learning experiences rarely build the capacity of educators (Korthagen, 2016; Guskey, 2003; Bayar, 2014). In a comparative review of continuous improvement methods, Yurkofsky (2020) revealed that the way professional learning is often constructed and delivered is almost never successful because it focuses on

surface level changes, rather than the deep work of addressing learning through organizational change. Even as educational leaders have made progress in becoming more engaged with improving teaching and learning, many still prioritize new reforms and exalt incentivized outcomes. A literature review of research on teacher practices and professional learning by Opfer and Pedder (2011) indicates that professional learning goes awry due to a lack of understanding of complexity and focuses on teachers to the exclusion of the organization and district.

Designing for professional learning is a complex task, with significant costs if not effective. In this context, our study sheds light on effective professional learning practices within a district that support educational leaders to address the shortcomings of professional learning. Given that research situates effective adult learning and professional learning in a social setting, our study focuses on the quality of effective collaborative professional learning.

Professional Learning as a Social Endeavor

Professional learning that capitalizes on interactions in and amongst educators maximizes its impact. In a qualitative study of teacher collaboration and learning, Bannister (2015) found that when teachers built community over time, their learning and their instructional practices evolved. In an analysis of adult learning, Drago-Severson (2016) concluded that four pillars of collaboration supported professional learning and growth: teaming, shared leadership, collegial inquiry, and mentoring. Each of these pillars demands adult learners work together to develop new understandings. In a summative review of research on teacher professional development, Opfer and Pedder (2011) found that professional learning affected teacher practice if teachers from the same school, department, or year level participated collectively because learning then became an ongoing, collective responsibility rather than an individual one. In a qualitative study of six principal professional learning experiences, Honig and Rainey (2014) found that providing

principals the opportunity to learn alongside their colleagues resulted in strengthened instructional leadership practices.

Research also establishes that collaborative professional learning experiences lead to shifts in practice (Bruce, 2010; Slavit et al., 2011). In a mixed methods multiple instrumental case study comparing the impact of the same professional learning experiences of teachers in two different districts, Bruce et al. (2010) found that teachers who had prior collaborative learning experiences achieved greater efficacy and improved student results. Past professional learning experiences provided teachers with collaborative mechanisms (e.g. authentic dialogue, peer observation, and connection between formal training dates), strengthening their collective experience. Using measurements of teacher's self-efficacy and overall math outcomes for students, the study concluded that the district in which teachers had prior learning experiences started with lower baseline data but changed their practice significantly more than the teachers in the district in which teachers had no prior experience. Slavit et al.'s (2011) grounded case study of math teachers' changing practice similarly found that collaboration increased teachers' willingness to adjust and expand their pedagogy. Tracking the trajectory of collaborative professional learning, Slavit et al. (2011) found that teachers who engaged in collaborative learning used significantly more student-centered instructional strategies and increased their own efficacy as a result.

These research findings suggest that an investigation of educators' experiences with collaboration must be incorporated into our study's understanding of professional learning. The research's emphasis on the importance of educator's previous experience also suggests that the learning context in which learning is constructed is important.

Professional Learning Context: Structured Formally and Informally

Since learning is constructed through social interaction, where the learning is situated matters. The learner is informed by their environment and in turn, the learner contributes to their environment, causing the cycle of learning to evolve (Wenger, 1998). The more we know about the identity of the learner, the context of this learning, and the learning process itself, the better able we are to design for effective learning experiences (Merriam, 2004).

Social learning has significant implications for designing adult learning within a system, such as a school or school district, and effective design for learning can include both formal and informal elements. In a qualitative, single-case study examining secondary social studies teacher professional learning, Thacker (2017) found that professional learning is best structured when it is ongoing, situated in the environment relevant to the teacher, is focused on the content, and is experienced collaboratively. Thacker (2017) also concluded that informal professional learning provides rich opportunities to advance teachers' practice and growth. Building on these findings, we will examine the way both formal professional learning opportunities (such as district-designed professional development sessions) and informal professional learning opportunities (such as peer observations that are educator directed) support instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

Instructional Leadership

The final area of research framing our inquiry is instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is one of the most referenced leadership concepts in current literature (Wang, 2018). In a concept co-occurrence network analysis of 1,328 articles examining the theoretical groundings of educational leadership, Wang found distributed and instructional leadership to be the first and second most frequent leadership concepts, respectively. Compared to other concepts of leadership, instructional leadership has what Hallinger et al. (2020) found to have "remarkable

staying power" (p. 1629), that "has not only endured but grown into one of the most powerful metaphors guiding our expectations for school leaders...throughout the world" (p. 1645). In their meta-analysis of 22 published studies which compared the effects of transformational leadership and instructional leadership on student outcomes, Robinson et al. (2008) found the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes to be three to four times greater than student outcomes which resulted from transformational leadership.

Instructional leadership includes practices that have both direct and indirect effects on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Hallinger (2011) later references and defines these practices as "leadership focus" (p. 129) or "avenues in which leadership impacts learning" (p. 129) including vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people. Vision is established by the leader and articulates the direction the school is moving in whereas goals are the indicators that determine this progress. Academic structures and processes must be systemic to shape and enhance the practice of teachers. The last avenue through which to demonstrate instructional leadership is by building capacity in others to lead. All three avenues have an impact on multiple levels of leadership within an organization.

Instructional Leadership is More than the Principal

With the emergence of the accountability era, student achievement metrics became public, both assisting and constraining principals' efforts for school improvement (Neumerski, 2013). District-wide accountability pushed instructional leadership to become the responsibility of all leaders within the district (Hallinger, 2020). Distributed leadership was borne out of the realization that principals alone cannot be responsible for the achievement of students; in order to

meet accountability targets, leadership is spread over many actors to improve the teaching and learning experiences within the school (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004).

Distributed leadership thus emerged as a lens to broaden the concept of leadership beyond the principal. District administrators, principals, middle-level instructional leaders (e.g., assistant principals), and teachers are collectively called upon to improve teaching and learning and their work is intertwined and interconnected (Spillane et al., 2004). Yet, much remains to be learned about how educators' interactions amongst many levels in a district contribute to instructional leadership. In her literature review of traditional instructional leadership literature, teacher instructional leadership literature, and coach instructional leadership literature, Neumerski (2013) found that across all three sets of research literature, further examination is needed about how educators' learning and work intersect in specific contexts to improve teaching and learning. Our study aims to contribute to filling this gap by analyzing the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership amongst many leaders within a district.

Instructional Leadership and the Impact on Student Achievement

Literature on instructional leadership asserts that goal-related constructs (e.g. vision, mission, learning targets) must contain an academic focus (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Murphy, 1988, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). The importance of this focus has emerged because research has found that leadership has a mediating effect on student outcomes; leaders influence school processes that impact teaching and learning (Hallinger 2011, Day et al., 2016). For example, leaders can design for learning when creating the master schedule to protect time on learning.

Further highlighting the impact of school leaders, a national longitudinal and mixed methods study in England, Day et al. (2016) found that leaders directly and indirectly attained and

maintained improvement efforts in schools. While Leithwood et al. (2008) determined that principal leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning, a more recent examination found that leaders at any level of the organization impact student learning by establishing conditions within the organization that focus on improved student outcomes and effective teaching (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Student learning is impacted by educational leaders' influence on classroom practice. In Robinson et al.'s meta-analysis (2008), five leadership dimensions were identified that influence student learning, the most significant dimension being "promoting and taking part in teacher learning" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 657). With a strong effect size, "leaders' involvement in teacher learning provides them with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable staff to make and sustain the changes required for improved outcomes" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 667). The other four dimensions had moderate positive effects: (1) planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; (2) establishing goals and expectations; (3) strategic resourcing; and (4) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 657). The net effect of allowing principals to focus on these dimensions has been proven to have positive implications for improving student learning: "the importance of this finding should not be underestimated as it is based on a large body of research completed over a substantial period of time" (Hallinger, 2011, p. 134). This research suggests that in order for the educational leaders in a district to actualize the achievement goals they set forth, there must be a shared commitment to instructional leadership amongst all members of a district.

The broad body of empirical evidence shows that instructional leadership incorporates effective practices within specific dimensions that can be developed across school and district leaders. Instructional leadership calls upon all leaders to prioritize teaching and learning. When

this focus exists, outcomes for students are positively impacted. These important revelations undergird our study as we seek to understand how instructional leadership is bounded and intertwined within a district (Harris, 2020).

Instructional Leadership During Crisis

Demands on school and district leadership expand exponentially during a crisis (Hannah et al., 2009). In a case study of the response to tornado devastation in Texas, Potter et al. (2021) found that school leaders must communicate effectively with staff and media; make operational, managerial, and logistical decisions quickly and under immense pressure; efficiently assess families' needs; manage the outpouring of philanthropy; and integrate parent and community voice in governance (Potter et al., 2021). In a case study of four elementary school principals' actions after the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, Mutch (2015a, 2015 b) described three components of effective leadership response, all of which have to be executed rapidly: dispositional work, including demonstrating values and beliefs; relational work, including fostering collaboration and building trust; and situational work, including adapting to changing needs, thinking creatively, and providing direction for the organization (Mutch, 2015a). In a qualitative study of Lebanese principals and schools responding to the international Syrian refugee crisis, Mahfouz et al. (2019) found that administrators spend a disproportionate amount of time "'putting out fires', resolving urgent issues, and attending to basic needs that typically are taken for granted in other schools" in a normal schooling situation (Mahfouz et al., 2019, p. 24). In sum, responsibilities shifted significantly during a crisis, and school leaders need to adapt rapidly to meet evolving demands (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Research also suggests the quality and nature of the social context before the crisis defines how the community handles the during and the after; it is difficult to build a culture of learning

and collaboration during a crisis if it did not exist previously. In an empirical, interview-based study of teachers and principals post Hurricane Katrina, Carr-Chellman (2008) found that contextual challenges of the past may resurface in predictable and unpredictable ways, "but they must be dealt with for the system to move on. Thus, careful recognition and examination of the current and past larger culture, while they may seem luxuries, are essential to change in chaos" (Carr-Chellman et al., 2008, p. 36). Similarly, after examining the interconnectivity of the learning communities of elementary schools in Christchurch, New Zealand both before and after the earthquake, Mutch (2015b) found that schools with an inclusive culture and with strong relationships beforehand were better situated to manage the challenges that arise during and after a crisis. This research base provides us with a clear understanding that the structures of professional learning existing within the district of study during times before the pandemic will inform the schools' and district's crisis response to COVID-19.

Taking the literature into account as a whole, we gained a number of important insights for our study. Following the research on learning as a social endeavor, our study will help to develop an understanding of professional learning amongst educators as a combination of both individual and external factors. Following research that situates effective adult learning and professional learning in a social setting, our study focused on the specific qualities of effective collaboration and took into account educators' prior experiences in the learning context. Our study assumes that instructional leadership emerges in the interactions among many educators in the district rather than centering on just the role of the principal. We employed a conceptual framework that allowed us to analyze how the learning that undergirds instructional leadership in the district is bounded and intertwined amongst leaders within the district, including both formal and informal opportunities for learning.

Conceptual Framework

Based on a socio-contextual theory of learning, the concept of a community of practice (CoP) provides our study with a useful framework for examining how learning in a district takes place at multiple levels through interconnected networks. A CoP is a group of people who share a common purpose and learn to pursue this purpose from one another (Wenger, 1998). Learning in a CoP is a negotiation between socially defined competence and individual experience; learning is not a solely individual process but a process of social participation. According to Wenger, this perspective has a number of implications for understanding and supporting learning:

> [F]or *individuals*, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities; for *communities*, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members; for *organizations*, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization. (pp.7-8)

The focus is not on what is learned but rather how learning occurs: with and from others.

A number of empirical studies demonstrate CoP to be a useful framework for studying education communities undergoing change. Printy (2008) employed a CoP framework to measure the influence of high school principals and department chairpersons on teachers' developing learning, professional beliefs, and instructional skills. Through a CoP frame, Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) analyzed a teacher induction program and the interconnectivity of the learning of the teachers within the network long term. Scanlan (2012) used a CoP framework to describe how the interconnectedness within an elementary school both facilitates and interrupts, or frustrates, adult learning as the community works toward becoming a socially just school community.

CoPs exist in overlapping networks, and individuals within these networks learn not only within but also across CoPs in "constellations" that are loosely configured and interconnected (Wenger, 1998; Scanlan, 2012). Therefore, a school district, as a complex organization that relies significantly on relationships to improve practice and effectively meet the social and academic needs of students, could be a CoP. Individual schools within that district could also be CoPs. Individuals who work at an individual school could be part of both the individual school and the district CoPs--as well as part of many other CoPs, such as a team within the school or a state-wide curriculum group.

A group of individuals working together must exhibit three dimensions in order to meet the criteria of a CoP. These three dimensions (joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire) can be revealed through a set of key questions (Wenger, 1998) in Figure 1.2 below.

Figure 1.2:

Dimensions of a CoP

Dimension	Explanation	Key Questions
Joint Enterprise	Results from a collective understanding of purpose and direction.	How does the community establish goals and accountability? How does the community demonstrate a shared way of engaging and doing things together?
Mutual Engagement	Emerges through a kind of social capital generated by sustained relationships.	How does the community interact? How does the community define who belongs?
Shared Repertoire	Results when members share discourse styles, histories, and tools to make sense of the learning.	What are the concepts, language, and tools of the community that embody its history and its perspective? How self-conscious is the community about the repertoire that it is developing and its effects on its practice?

These three dimensions work together: "Without the learning energy of those who take initiative, the community becomes stagnant. Without strong relationships of belonging, it is torn apart. And without the ability to reflect, it becomes hostage to its own history." (Wenger, 2000, p. 230). As we examined professional learning and instructional leadership in the district, these three dimensions of CoPs guided our collective analysis.

Individual members of our team drew upon nuanced aspects of CoPs in their individual studies (see Figure 1.3). Given that this study recognizes that learning must consider the individual, the context of the learning, and the nature of the interactions that occur, the four learning capabilities will be drawn upon to understand these concepts: Citizenship, Power, Partnerships, and Governance. Partnerships, Governance, and Power attend to the context of the learning and the nature of the interactions. Citizenship refers to the investment of the individual, including both previous and current experiences. Pires and Erickson used these learning

capabilities as an additional conceptual frame for their analyses of how middle-level instructional leaders learn to become instructional leaders and how superintendents strengthen principal's organizational commitment, respectively. Of the four capabilities, Hosmer used Citizenship, Power, and Partnership to examine teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for teacher learning. Each of the learning capabilities are fleshed out in our respective Chapter Threes.

Figure 1.3:

Group and Individual Conceptual Framework

Group Focus:

- What does professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels?
- How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?

Group Conceptual Framework: Communities of Practice

Joint Enterprise, a collective understanding of purpose and direction.

- How does the community establish goals and accountability?
- How does the community demonstrate a shared way of engaging and doing things together?

Mutual Engagement, social capital generated by sustained relationships.

- How does the community interact?
- How does the community define who belongs?

Shared Repertoire, shared discourse styles, histories, and tools.

- What are the concepts, language, and tools of the community that embody its history and its perspective?
- How self-conscious is the community about the repertoire that it is developing and its effects on its practice?

Pires	Hosmer	Clark	Erickson
Focus: How middle-level leaders pursue and make sense of instructional leadership	**Focus:** Teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for teacher learning	**Focus:** How principals negotiate their membership in both their district and in their schools	**Focus:** How superintendents strengthen principal's organizational commitment
Key concepts: ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships ● Governance: stewardship and emergence	**Key Concepts:** ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships	**Key Concepts:** ● Boundaries ● Brokering	**Key Concepts:** ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships ● Governance: stewardship and emergence

Within the broader concept of mutual engagement, the processes of boundaries and brokering describe how members transfer elements of practice from one community to another (Smith et al., 2017). Clark used the concepts of boundaries and brokering to describe how principals negotiate their membership in both their district and in their schools as they learn to be instructional leaders during this time of crisis. These concepts are discussed more fully in Clark's Chapter Three.

CoP provides our research team with a framework to interrogate, classify, and understand the goals, ways of doing, patterns of interaction, concepts, language, and tools of the communities we studied. Cumulatively, we aimed to describe the multiple complex layers of the learning process in these communities. We now turn to Chapter Two and a full description of our research design and methods.

CHAPTER TWO[2]

Research Design and Methodology

Our collective study investigated the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership during a time of crisis. Our individual studies each focused on a particular community of practice within the district (see Figure 1.1). Erickson focused on the practices of the superintendent that establish principals' organizational commitment. Clark examined the roles autonomy plays in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction. Pires explored the systems and socio-cultural influences that impact the learning of middle-level instructional leaders (MILs). Hosmer studied teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for that learning. Collectively, these different foci cohere to provide a rich description of the learning that exists within a school district and how it is bounded (has defined boundaries) and intertwined (has interconnection across boundaries).

To explore these interactions, we implemented a case study design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). A qualitative case study was most appropriate for our study because in order to answer our two core research questions, we needed to capture participant views and perspectives, situated in their particular contexts.

Site and Participant Selection

We established three criteria for our site selection. Learning and opportunity gaps that have disproportionately affected historically marginalized students have widened during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Eyles et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Because we were interested in a district trying to address inequity in academic outcomes through

[2] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne R. Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, and Mario Pires.

instructional leadership, our first criterion was a district serving historically marginalized students. We sought an urban district of medium size in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are identified as "high needs" according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) criteria. According to the DESE definition, "high needs" refers to "belonging to at least one of the following individual subgroups: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL) and former ELL students, or low income students (eligible for free/reduced price school lunch)" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). Given that research has found that a superintendent may impact student achievement as soon as two years into their tenure (Waters & Marzano, 2006), our second criterion was a district whose superintendent has been in their role for at least two years so that instructional initiatives are in place. Finally, our third criterion was that the district be large enough to have enough MILs to support our study. We sought a medium size district, meaning a district serving 10,000-20,000 students.

Following these three criteria, we identified a district we gave the pseudonym "Frederick." The superintendent at Frederick has served four years in this role, and the district has a little over 15,000 students in twenty-five schools. Frederick, in Massachusetts, serves a diverse student population (see Table 2.1). For example, more than four out of five students are students of color, and more than one in three students are English Learners, more than triple the state average.

Table 2.1:

Student Subgroups by percentage

Subgroup	Frederick Percentage	State Percentage
African American	7.9	9.3
Asian	7.4	7.2
Hispanic	69.1	23.1
Native American	0.3	0.2
White	12.3	55.7
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.0	4.3
English Language Learners	36.3	11.0
Students with Disabilities	17.5	18.9
High Needs	85.8	55.6

We used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to gather data from members situated across two CoP types: the District CoP and school-based CoPs. Purposeful sampling is grounded in the idea that the researchers want to discover, understand, and gain insight on a phenomenon and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We met with the superintendent and representatives from his executive cabinet (members of the district CoP) to elicit their support in identifying department leaders and principals that met our selection criteria. To broaden our reach to the district and the key players that engage in instructional leadership, we then employed snowball sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to

identify MILs and teachers (members of school-based CoPs). When we met with principals, we asked them to identify MILs and teachers; we also asked MILs to identify other MILs.

Data Collection

Members of the research team served as the primary instruments for data collection. In order to triangulate multiple data sources for "convergence of evidence," (Yin, 2018, p.129), our research team focused on three of the four possible data sources that Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outline: interviews, observations, and document review. In the summer of 2021, we attained IRB approval and began data gathering immediately. We completed data collection in January 2022.

Interviews

We gathered the majority of our evidence through interviews. Before interviews began, each member of the research team conducted a pilot interview with a trusted educational colleague, using their individually proposed interview protocol. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) state that a pilot interview provides an opportunity to "quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions…you should have thought to include in the first place" (p.117) This process highlighted where our individual questions had intersections, and we then agreed to create a common principal interview protocol (Appendix A). The common principal protocol allowed us to gather data related to both our group questions and members' individual research questions. Members of our research team also developed protocols for interviews with the superintendent, MILs, and teachers (Appendix B, Appendix C, Appendix D).

Our research team conducted a combination of face-to-face interviews and web-based interviews (via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform). Prior to the start of each interview,

we shared our common informed consent form (Appendix E) and acquired informed consent from each participant. Interviews were semi-structured. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outline the benefits of a semi-structured interview and note that this format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas of the topic" (p. 110). "We recorded interviews and used a professional transcription service. Members of the research team interviewed various educators depending upon the focus of their individual studies (Table 2.2); however, three members of the research team interviewed principals because the perspective of the principal is vital to each member's focus.

In total, our team conducted 22 interviews. Our sample included the superintendent, central office personnel, principals, middle-level instructional leaders, and teachers. Collecting data through interviews across these multiple roles allowed us to gain a broad context of the district. By interviewing across roles, we were also able to calibrate our coding and analyze data with varied perspectives in mind.

Table 2.2:

Interview Subjects

Participants	Number	Interviewer(s)
Superintendent of Schools	1	Clark, Erickson
District Personnel	1	Erickson
Principals	7	Clark, Erickson, Hosmer
Middle-level Instructional Leaders	8	Pires
Teachers/Teacher Leaders	5	Hosmer

Observations

Our research team completed observations as a second source of data. These opportunities provided a first-hand encounter with the learning of educational leaders engaged in instructional leadership and to see the nuances associated with the learning in the moment. For each observation, the researcher served as what Creswell and Guetterman (2019) call a "non-participant" observer (p. 215). During the observation, researchers captured notes on the physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and their own behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We developed a common observation protocol to ensure consistency of data collection (Appendix F). We observed four district-level leadership meetings (two in person and two via Zoom) and one meeting amongst MILs (via Zoom). In addition, we observed one teacher-facilitated planning meeting (in person). COVID-19 protocols restricted further access, a limitation we discuss further in Chapter Four.

Document Review

Finally, we reviewed documents as a third source of data. In order for the research team to assess collaboration before, during and after COVID-19, we reviewed documents that described curriculum and instructional priorities beginning with the 2018 - 2019 academic year (see Table 2.3 for internal and public documents collected). Public records included the Massachusetts' DESE District Review, the district and schools' improvement plans, and recently completed or approved grants. These records shed light on the instructional leadership initiatives taking place at the global level which will inform the team of key initiatives. Examples of internal records that were requested from the district include district and school professional development materials and superintendent goals. These documents provided key information on district initiatives, including who was involved, the timeline for implementation, and measurements for success. These documents determined the subjects in the district who were most closely connected to instructional leadership, informing our purposeful sampling for our interviews. In addition, these documents uncovered nuances between what is shared publicly and what is for internal use. We used a common document review protocol to analyze these materials (Appendix G).

Table 2.3:

Documents Reviewed

Type of Document	Document Name
Private	"Framework for Success" Elementary Lesson Planning Template
	Frederick Organizational Chart
	SY 21-22 Leadership Institute Powerpoint Presentation
	SY 21-22 Secondary School P.L.C. Meeting Structure
Public	Frederick District and School Websites
	Frederick School Committee Policy - CA: Administration Goals/District Administration Priority Objectives
	Frederick School Committee Policy - CC: Administrative Organization Plan
	Frederick School Committee - video archive February 11, 2021
	Frederick School Committee - video archive February 25, 2021
	Frederick Strategic Plan 2019-2024
	Frederick Student Opportunity Act Plan 2021-23
	Frederick Superintendent Goals: 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021
	FY 21-22 District Proposed Budget
	Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education District and School Profiles

Data Analysis

Given that a qualitative case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; pg. 233), the volume of data collected was

expansive. To organize data, the research team created a shared virtual folder system on a secure hard drive. Data collection and analysis was a simultaneous process. As we interviewed respondents, observed sessions, and reviewed documents, we each wrote memos to capture personal thoughts, insights, hunches, or broad ideas or themes. These were also stored in our shared organized electronic folder system. The research team agreed on the use of date, initials of the researcher, and the role of interviewee as an initial organizational structure. Documents, field notes, and transcripts were uploaded into a coding secure, password-protected software, called Quirkos. To preserve the anonymity of our participants, we have used the singular they throughout this dissertation as endorsed as part of APA Style because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender. We refer to the superintendent only by title and he and him pronouns.

As the team analyzed data, whether during data collection or after in subsequent cycles of data analysis, we each began to code. Saldaña (2013) defines a code as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Each researcher followed an agreed upon sequence as shown below in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4:

Common Coding Protocol

Common Sequence to Code	
Cycle 1	*Code for common codes* a. Common a priori codes : Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, Shared Repertoire b. Common codes that develop through open coding
Cycle 2	*Code for the researcher's own codes** a. The researcher's a priori codes b. The researcher's individual codes that develop through open coding **this cycle was conducted multiple times for each researcher*
Cycle 3	*Code for overall findings* a. Each researcher presented their own findings to the group b. Group members synthesized the collective findings to determine overall group findings

As researchers individually open coded, different types of triangulation occured. Researchers noticed similar codes across multiple data types (interviews, observations, and documents). In addition, the research team conducted triangulation data meetings twice weekly where members of the team shared the category constructions that they developed, also known by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as analytical coding (p. 206), in order to compare and inform future collection sessions. To calibrate for codes, we selected one interview and individually coded it. We then reviewed and discussed how each of us coded the transcript. This practice, similar to when teachers calibrate for assessment and grading, resulted in dialogue that further deepened our individual and collective understanding of how the data was connected to our group research questions as well our individual studies. During our bi-weekly meetings, all four group members

shared coding memos and gained familiarity with each other's coding systems (Appendix K). Each member coded their individual data using three coding cycles (illustrated in Figure 2.4).

This multi-step process served two purposes. It supported our research focus on the ways in which educators' learning is bounded and intertwined within and amongst various educators across CoPs. In addition, it provided an opportunity for inter-researcher reliability.

Positionality

The research team responsible for this group study is composed of four educational leaders from public school districts across Massachusetts whose combined years of service at the end of 2022 academic year is 93 years. While some of the members worked in the same district at various points in their career, each currently have distinct roles, responsibilities, and titles. As full-time practitioners currently employed in a public school system during a pandemic, our own biases and experiences may influence the objectivity of data collection and analysis. We worked through this subjectivity by using a reflective journal. During our weekly triangulation data meetings, we reviewed each other's reflective journal to share insights, recognize biases, and provide each other with constructive feedback to critically reflect on how our positionality influenced the analysis and guard against any related negative effects (e.g., distortions, omissions).

CHAPTER THREE[3]

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19: THE LEARNING OF MIDDLE-LEVEL LEADERS

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for educators to learn quickly under "white water" (Tusting and Barton 2003, p. 33) conditions. These unstable conditions require school leaders to balance decision-making between instructional leadership and combating a global pandemic to maintain a safe learning environment for all. Tusting and Barton argue that organizations will develop a competitive edge during these conditions if they "encourag[e] every employee within an organization to personally invest in seeking continual learning and improvement" (p. 33). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need to devote time on personal growth and learning, as leaders try to eliminate opportunity gaps and improve teaching and learning outcomes for all students in an unparalleled time in American history.

Research on learning and improvement in education tends to focus on students, teachers, principals, and superintendents, and to overlook Middle-level Instructional Leaders (MILs). (Glanz, 1994; Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Ribbons, 1997). MILs, for the purposes of this study, include both district- and school-based positions that have formal responsibilities to improve instructional leadership. They are "middle-level" insofar as they are under the leadership of a top administrator in their context, but in a leadership role over others. For example, in the district context, Assistant Directors are MILs: under the supervision of the executive cabinet (including the superintendent) and in a direct leadership role over content areas taught within schools. In the school context, Assistant Principals and department heads are MILs: under the supervision of the principal, but in a direct

[3] This chapter was individually written by Mario Pires.

leadership role over teachers.

MILs are important because they provide - at least potentially - additional leaders who can focus attention on teaching and learning, and thus positively influence student outcomes. Robinson and colleagues (2008) argue that by focusing their leadership on teaching and learning, principals are more likely to have a greater influence on student outcomes. This point extends to MILs as well. However, the vast majority of empirical research on leadership for learning focuses on principals and ignores MILs. (Bush, 2020) This gap in research, specifically related to the practice of instructional leadership within and among MILs, is especially timely in the COVID-19 context. As superintendents and principals have been pulled in multiple directions to solve immediate crises, MILs have assumed greater responsibilities for instructional leadership. (Bush et al., 2022)

Attention to the learning and improvement of MILs is a worthy endeavor. Oleszewski and colleagues (2012) found that assistant principals are "rarely afforded the breadth of professional development opportunities that teachers and principals receive" (p. 267). In addition, Harvey (1994) calls MILs a "wasted educational resource" (Harvey, 1994 p. 17). MILs play a crucial role in developing and maintaining the quality of students' learning experiences (Harris & Jones, 2017). By honing in on the instructional leadership practice of MILs, this study contributes to filling the gap in research and providing the support that these underutilized leaders deserve to effectively executive outcomes for students.

To that end, my research question asks, "How do MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis?" This study has the potential to help clarify how MILs act as instructional leaders during a time of crisis, and this can in turn help schools and districts mobilize and maximize their role in improving teaching and learning.

Literature Review

In order to situate this study, I review three bodies of literature. I begin by defining the roles and responsibilities of MILs in the 21st century context. Next, I describe current research pertaining to instructional leadership and frame it in the context of this study. Finally, I conclude with a review of scholarship related to MILs professional learning opportunities.

MILs' Roles and Responsibilities

MILs are critical roles whose myriad responsibilities are complex and ambiguous (Gurr & Dyrsdale, 2012). These roles include subject leaders, middle managers, heads of department, curriculum coordinators, and vice principals (Harris and Jones, 2017). MILs can be situated at the district or school level. Common duties include visioning and goal setting, using data to drive decision making, coaching and evaluating teachers, creating the master schedule, developing and managing curriculum and instructional programs, communicating with stakeholders, and facilitating the professional development program for teachers and support personnel (Kaplan and Owings, 1999; Lashway, 2007; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The volume of role types coupled with the ambiguity of their responsibilities have made MILs challenging to study.

There is great promise in addressing the ambiguity of the responsibilities that MILs have to improve instructional leadership. Harris and Jones (2017) have found that a significant part of within-school variance can be found in the middle layer of organizations and thus implying that this is a critical layer in need of support and development. Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) describe this "Leading from the Middle" approach as a strategy that "reduce[s] bad variation among school districts" and "promote[s] collaboration amongst [MILs] so that they "become the collective drivers of change and improvement together" (pg. 44). Fullan (2015) validates this approach: "it mobilizes the middle (districts and/or networks of schools), thus developing

widespread capacity, while at the same time the middle works with its schools more effectively and becomes a better and more influential partner upward to the center" (pg. 1).

Because MILs are positioned both at the district level and within schools, intentional cohesive collaboration between all MILs is a strategy best primed to actualize change. District MILs are poised to support implementation of goals by generating will, building capacity, and re-orienting the organization (Tichnor-Wagner, 2019). School-based MILs have a pivotal role in improving learning outcomes for students as a result of their direct influence on teachers' classroom practice (Fleming, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2017; Leask & Terrell, 2014). Connecting the work of both builds cohesive implementation of initiatives. In a quantitative study across 51 secondary schools in Hong Kong, Li et al. (2021) examined how the interplay of MIL and other contextual factors impacts system-wide English Language curriculum reform. Li et al. concluded:

> "Middle leaders are at a better strategic position to facilitate lateral and vertical flow of information, and to mobilize social processes in coaching, mentoring and engendering informal as well as formal professional learning....building the capacity and unleashing the full leadership potential of middle leaders is pivotal to effecting change in schools" (p. 239-240).

Superintendents and principals are constantly inundated with new challenges while navigating the unfamiliar territory of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, leaders are increasingly relying on their organizational structure to improve teaching and learning and an urgent need exists for MILs to lead in their absence.

In short, there is great promise in coherently defining roles and responsibilities of MILs across a district. Because within-school variance can be found in the middle layer of

organizations, addressing this variance will develop MILs into a "substantive leadership role" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 126) that has promise to affect organizational change.

Instructional Leadership

In the previous section, I argue that clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of MILs will significantly (and indirectly) impact student achievement in school districts. In this section, I define instructional leadership and describe how it is related to MILs' practice.

For decades, researchers have examined if and how leadership impacts student learning and constructed many models to describe this. Models include instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 1996), transformational leadership (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), and shared leadership (Heck and Hallinger, 2009). In the international meta-analysis conducted by Robinson et al, (2008), results show that instructional leadership best captures the impact school leadership has on learning. This study uses Hallinger's (2011) definition of instructional leadership as a leadership focus meant to explore three paths: vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people. Vision refers to "the direction in which the school seeks to move" (pg. 129) and goals refers to the "specific targets" (pg. 129) that need to be achieved to actualize that vision. Academic structures and processes refers to the systemic changes that "shape or enhance the practice of teachers" (pg. 133). And finally, people refers to a focus on "capacity building and develop[ing] other leaders" (pg. 133) who can carry on the mission of improving student learning. MILs have the responsibility to focus on these three paths as key brokers - alongside the superintendent, principals, and teachers - to support schools and districts in improving outcomes for students.

Instructional leadership also is a key standard of practice represented in the evaluation process of MILs in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Two rubrics exist: one for district-based

administrators and one for school-based administrators. Each rubric contains four standards (Instructional Leadership, Management and Operations, Family and Community Engagement, and Professional Culture) and the Instructional Leadership standard contains the same six indicators in both rubrics (Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Evaluation, Data-informed Decision-Making, and Student Learning). Table 3.1 below shows language from the same standard and indicator from both rubrics.

Table 3.1:

DESE District-based Language versus School-based Language

	District-based Evaluation Rubric Language	**School-based Evaluation Rubric Language**
I-D.3: Observations and Feedback	● Regularly visits every school throughout the year to observe administrator practice and provide quality feedback (specific, timely, actionable). ● Regularly engages with administrators in conversations to reinforce effective practice, and provides clear next steps and support for improvement, as well as subsequent monitoring and follow up observation. ● Celebrates and shares effective practices and strategies with others. Models this practice for others.	● Makes multiple unannounced visits to classrooms every day and provides quality, content-aligned feedback (specific, timely, actionable) to all educators. ● Regularly engages with educators in conversations to reinforce effective practice. Provides clear next steps and support for improvement from one performance level to the next, as well as subsequent monitoring and follow up observation. ● Celebrates and shares effective practices and strategies with staff. Models this practice for others.

A key difference between the language of the two rubrics include the purview of responsibilities. District MILs are expected to visit every school to observe administrator practice while school-based MILs are required to do the same with the educators in their building. While both require the leader to engage in conversations to reinforce effective practice, district MILs are expected to have those conversations with administrators and school-based MILs with teachers.

This distinction between purview of responsibilities is regularly presented in the various indicators. As such, a key responsibility of district MILs is to provide school-based MILs with direction related to instructional leadership, specifically vision/goals, academic structures and building capacity of others, so that school-based MILs can in turn best support teachers.

Professional Learning Opportunities for MILs

In the previous section, I describe how instructional leadership is connected to the work MILs do on a daily basis. In this final section of my literature review, I outline the opportunities MILs have to learn professionally.

In the United States, three types of organizations are typically responsible for providing professional development to educators: school districts, universities, and professional or third party associations (Davis et al., 2005). Yet, when narrowing the scope of educational leadership to MILs, university administration programs do not provide courses specifically designed for the assistant principalship and there are no national organizations or third-party associations solely for MILs (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). As a consequence, once educators (practicing teachers or others) get a masters degree in educational leadership and complete a practicum for superintendent/principal licensure, they begin their educational leadership in a middle level position (such as assistant principal) with no formal training for the MIL position.

Literature suggests certain practices of principals and district leaders support the professional learning of MILs. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2010) highlighted having a leadership learning continuum, providing learning experiences that are grounded in practice, and fostering learning networks amongst colleagues as exemplary district practices. In an empirical study of MILs that spanned over a decade, Gurr and Drysdale (2012) found that MILs can be developed by providing them with quality professional learning. Two areas of consideration include building their professional knowledge and practice in teaching and learning and improving their ability to build school capacity. Oleszewski and colleagues (2012), in their extensive literature review of assistant principals, concluded that professional development should focus on the development of skills and the preparation for career advancement. Examples of such professional development include apprenticeships and workshops that focus on “field practice,

collaborative inquiry, case study analysis, self-study, individual and group dialogue, feedback on performance, and action plans" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 129).

Even though literature highlights the importance of these practices, MILs often find themselves without many opportunities to learn and grow and are responsible for their own learning. Thus, the literature suggests a tension exists for MILs between balancing one's own professional learning with managing the learning of others (through instructional leadership). Lipscombe et al. (2021), in their extensive review of 35 articles across 14 countries, notes that while MILs facilitate the professional learning of others, they lack opportunities for their own professional leadership development and often neglect to see the need for their own development. They stated "MLs' professional development should include a focus on: leading teaching, learning and curriculum; management (e.g. crisis management, legalities, resource management); and capacity building in the individual, professional, organizational and community domains" (p. 12). Instead, MIL development usually occurs with informal training and enculturation that occurs through socialization (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). That is, MILs acquire the characteristics and norms of their role informally through socializing with others. As a result of this tension, learning for MILs is not an intentional and cohesive priority.

In summary, the equivocal responsibilities of the many MIL role types that exist have made them challenging to determine their contributions to instructional leadership. Because research is often geared towards improving teacher practice, research often neglects how MILs learn to support teachers with improving their practice. Intentional cohesive collaboration between MILs in both the district and school level may improve the flow of information that supports the actualization of vision/goals, improves academic systems and structures, and builds capacity of people.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis, this study will draw from social learning theory as a conceptual framework to understand the phenomenon of learning. As established in Chapter One, I will draw on the social learning theory of communities of practice (CoPs). Given that learning is a socially-situated phenomenon (Tusting & Barton, 2003), and that MILs are brokers between two or more layers within an organization, this conceptual framework will help me understand each role as a member of multiple CoPs.

For educational leaders, attention to this investment of learning and improvement is two-fold. First, they must attend to their own learning, and the practice that develops overtime. In a report synthesizing extant research, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) describes the phenomenon of learning as "an active verb and is something people do rather than something that is done to them. People are not passive recipients of learning, even if they are not always aware that the learning process is happening" (p. 12). It notes that an individual's stance towards their own learning is key: "[l]earners are most successful at learning and will sustain their own learning if they are mindful of themselves as learners and thinkers" (p. 14). Social learning theory accepts that participants engage their very beings as vehicles for learning and knowledgeability is a form of identity anchored in practice.

Dually as important, educational leaders are responsible for establishing the conditions of learning for others to seek continual learning and improvement. This learning is a social process embedded within a system of cultural meaning that has developed overtime (Nasir & Hand, 2006; National Academies Press, 2018; National Research Council, 2009; Tomasello, 2016). Educational leaders are responsible for organizing learning across this complex social system and

this responsibility is especially urgent during COVID-19. They have the ability to cultivate conditions that change the learning trajectory of an organization. In order to understand how MILs personally and socially engage in instructional leadership, this study hones in on the CoPs of MILs by describing their learning capability (Wenger, 2009).

Learning Capabilities in Social Learning Systems

To study how MILs participate in a social system and pursue instructional leadership, I will use a concept that Wenger (2009) describes as " one of the most important characteristics in social systems" (p. 193): learning capability. Wenger identifies four learning capabilities and describes their relevance to social innovation (Table 3.2) and a detailed description of each learning capability is available in Appendix I. COVID-19 has exacerbated the need for all educators to be innovative. Analyzing how MILs pursue instructional leadership through citizenship, power, partnership, and governance will help foster the innovation of these underutilized roles in both the district and school settings.

Table 3.2:

Four Learning Capabilities

Citizenship	Power	Partnership	Governance
A focus on the individual identity and investment of each participant in a learning system.	A focus on both vertical and horizontal accountability structures in a learning system.	A focus on why and how participants come and work together in practice in a learning system.	A focus on the process of a social system becoming a learning system.

I use the example of a typical high school student's schedule as a metaphor to understand CoPs and how the four learning capabilities are connected to their learning. Each student exists as a member of different classes throughout the day. Each class can be thought of as a CoP and each CoP may have overlapping students within it. Students can also be bounded in other CoPs - such as by grade-level, by sporting team, or by school. No matter the boundary, the four learning capabilities cultivate the conditions for learning within a CoP.

The first of the capabilities described in this study is power. Power describes both the vertical and horizontal accountability structures that exist within social systems. Vertical accountability reflects the impact of hierarchy; whereas horizontal power reflects the accountability that members within a community have to each other. So to apply the high school metaphor, vertical accountability is reflected in the principal and teacher shaping the schedule and thus directing the learning of students. Horizontal accountability is reflected in the behavioral norms that have been established within and among students in a school impacting the way in which they participate. This concept applies to my study, since vertical and horizontal accountability structures affect MILs' instructional leadership. MILs sit in unique places within the traditional hierarchy, and engage with many partners in the learning process.

Second, the partnership capability describes why and how participants come and work together in practice. Partnership reflects community dynamics anchored in the belief that each member has the potential to contribute and be valued. Continuing with the high school metaphor, students are involved in many learning partnerships with other individuals, including each of their teachers, students, family members, and other educators. Applied to my study, MILs come together with a purpose to pursue instructional leadership in partnership with others, and this capability helps me analyze why and how they do so.

The third of the capabilities used in this study is governance. This signifies the process by which a social system becomes a learning system. Learning that drives governance can be categorized in two ways. Stewarding governance reflects "a concerted effort to move a social system in a given direction" (Wenger, 2009, p. 13). Put differently, it is learning that is driven by seeking agreement. Emergent governance attends to learning that bubbles up and emerges organically from members within the community. Carrying over the high school metaphor, stewarding governance is similar to a teacher offering choice to students studying a particular standard in a lesson and emergent governance is similar to students joining together to affect change on a school policy. In my analysis I consider learning governance to help me see how MILs drive learning with others or address emerging learning from those that they work most closely with.

The last of the capabilities used in this study is citizenship - the personal side of learning. Citizenship is related to the individual identity of each participant and how they each manage their participation in and across learning spaces. So, in the high school example, each student is enrolled in multiple classes in high school. How they invest themselves in each class impacts how much they learn. For the purpose of my study, the citizenship learning capability takes into

account how MILs invest themselves in their learning and how they may serve as brokers between and among these various CoPs in which they engage.

MILs within one district participate in social learning systems, and these CoPs are impacted by power dynamics, partnerships, governance and individual identities. These four learning capabilities serve as the conceptual framework to help me analyze how MILs are contributing members of social learning systems and how the dynamics of these social learning systems impact their learning as they pursue instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

Research Design & Methodology

The aim of this individual study is to understand how MILs across a district pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis. This study contributes to our larger project, examining how professional learning and instructional leadership are bounded and intertwined at many levels within a district. I will employ a qualitative case study, defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (, p. 37). A qualitative case study was most appropriate because I use an inductive investigative strategy to explore how MILs interpret their experience, construct their worlds, and determine the meaning they attribute to that experience.

Data Collection

My team and I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In order to triangulate multiple data sources for "convergence of evidence," (Yin, 2018, p. 129), I relied on three data sources that Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outline as valid sources of evidence: interviews, document review, and observations. Data collection occurred from August to December of 2021.

Interviews served as the major data source gathered in this study. I employed purposeful sampling to identify research participants to interview. Purposeful sampling is grounded in the idea that the researchers want to discover, understand, and gain insight on a phenomenon and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). I selected three initial MILs based on the recommendation of the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction. During the interview with the three initial MILs, each was asked who the strong instructional leaders were and why. The interviewees each described strong instructional leaders within their district, which led me to identify six additional interviewees for a total of 10 interviews used in this study (See table 3.3).

Table 3.3:

MILs Interviewed

Role	Level	Researcher
Executive Director	District-based	Cargill
Assistant Director	District-based	Pires
Assistant Director	District-based	Pires
Coach	District-based	Pires
Coach	District-based	Pires
Program Specialist	School-based	Pires
Program Specialist	School-based	Pires
Department Head	School-based	Pires
Curriculum Instruction Teacher	School-based	Hosmer
Vice Principal	School-based	Pires

Of the ten interviews, 5 interviews were of district-based MILs and 5 were school-based MILs. Four of the interviews were web-based interviews via Zoom and six were face-to-face interviews. I conducted 8 interviews personally, and drew from two interviews conducted by teammates. We used a semi-structured interview because the format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas of the topic" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). I developed the interview protocol with Wenger's Learning Capabilities in mind. The questions aimed to understand how capable MILs are to learn using citizenship, power, partnerships, and governance.

Alongside interviews, I drew upon documents to help me understand how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) define documents as

"public and private records that qualitative researchers obtain about a site or participants in a study" (p. 223). I retrieved some documents from the district and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) website while others were provided by educators from within the district (see Table 3.4). Documents were selected to identify the number of MILs within the district, describe the instructional leadership priorities of MILs, and understand the practice of MILs.

Table 3.4:

List of Documents Collected

Type of Document	Document Name
Private	SY 21-22 Leadership Institute Powerpoint Presentation
	District Strategic Plan 2019-2024
	SY 21-22 Secondary School P.L.C. Meeting Structure
	Frederick Organizational Chart
	"Framework for Success" Elementary Lesson Planning Template
Public	FY 21-22 District Proposed Budget
	District and Schools Website
	Department of Elementary and Secondary Education District and School Profile

Third, in order to experience a first-hand encounter with the learning of instructional leadership experienced by MILs, I engaged in two observations of MILs. For both observations, I served as what Creswell and Guetterman (2019) call a "non-participant" observer (p. 215) as to not influence the study. First I observed an in-person "welcome back" meeting with the

superintendent, district leaders, and principals in September at the beginning of the school year. Second, I observed a Zoom meeting between MILs within one school. In order to ensure consistency of data collection, I used a common observation protocol (see Appendix F) to capture notes on the participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and their own behavior (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

As my team and I reviewed documents, observed, and interviewed, we created analytical memos to capture personal thoughts, insights, hunches, or broad ideas or codes. Saldana (2013) defines codes as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). The team began coding by sharing codes related to mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise during our weekly meetings. These codes further developed and changed as we used our individual conceptual frameworks to describe the individual cases each member studied. As a result, data collection and analysis was an iterative and cyclical process.

We used two data software programs to support storing and organizing data: Quirkos and Boston College's Secure Hard Drive. My team and I transcribed each interview and uploaded them into Quirkos using the structure projects function. This allowed for data to be populated by each question, and each of the questions to be aligned to an appropriate Learning Capability. Initially, I used the four Learning Capabilities outlined in the conceptual framework (citizenship, power, partnership, and governance) as a-priori codes (see Appendix H). As themes emerged, assertions related to the three components of instructional leadership (vision and goals, academic structures that support classroom practice, and people) were developed. This process allowed the

conceptual framework to be the vehicle for describing how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

Throughout I took a variety of steps to ensure the validity of our data. First, the research team and I met on a weekly basis to develop coding protocols to use as we collect data from interviews, observations, and document reviews. For example, a document analysis coding protocol was used (see Appendix C) to help identify the curricular and instructional priorities of the district, highlight who is stewarding instructional leadership initiatives, and understand the historical, social, and cultural context of the district and schools. Next, I conducted a cognitive interview to see if the questions actually lend themselves to the types of responses needed to address the research question. Lastly, we triangulated our data from interviews, observations, and documents to develop a full, nuanced understanding of the themes that began to develop. These steps increased the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged from the data.

Findings

In this section, I present evidence showing how MILs in one district (thereafter referred to as Frederick) pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis. I begin by describing the research context. Next, using Hallinger's (2011) definition of instructional leadership, I organize my findings according to the three avenues through which leadership impacts learning: vision and goals, academic structures, and people. My conceptual framework serves as the vehicle to understand how MILs pursue each of these avenues through power, governance, partnerships, and citizenship.

MILs in Frederick

As stated previously, MILs include both district- and school-based positions that have formal responsibilities to improve instructional leadership but do not include the superintendent,

principals, or full-time teachers. After a review of the SY 2022 Fiscal Budget proposal, school and district websites, and the district-provided organizational chart, I identified at least 112 MILs in Frederick, spanning eight different roles. To organize and understand MILs within the context of the district, I categorize these MILs into two distinct CoPs: District-based MILs and School-based MILs.

Of the 112 MILs identified, a minority of the MILs in Frederick (20/112, or 18%) belong to the district-based CoP. Position titles within the District MIL CoP include Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, assistant director, program specialist, and different coaches including an instructional coach, four mathematics coaches, and at least one literacy coach. One interviewee spoke about an additional four Early College Coordinators that are situated in the field but this was not validated through a review of the budget and therefore were not included in the count. Because one of the six administrators working directly with the superintendent in the executive cabinet oversees the Curriculum Department (the department that houses the 20 district-based CoP members), they were included as part of this count.

The vast majority of MILs (92/112, or 82%) are part of school-based CoPs. The number of school-based MILs assigned to each school CoP varied depending upon the size of school and the DESE-determined accountability status (Table 3.5). The role titles include coach, Program Specialist, Vice Principal, Curriculum Instruction Teacher, and Department Head. Since school-based MILs are dispersed across 25 schools, these CoPs are considerably smaller than the district CoP.

Table 3.5:

Number of School-based MILs

School Type	MLIL Positions	# of Teachers	# of Students

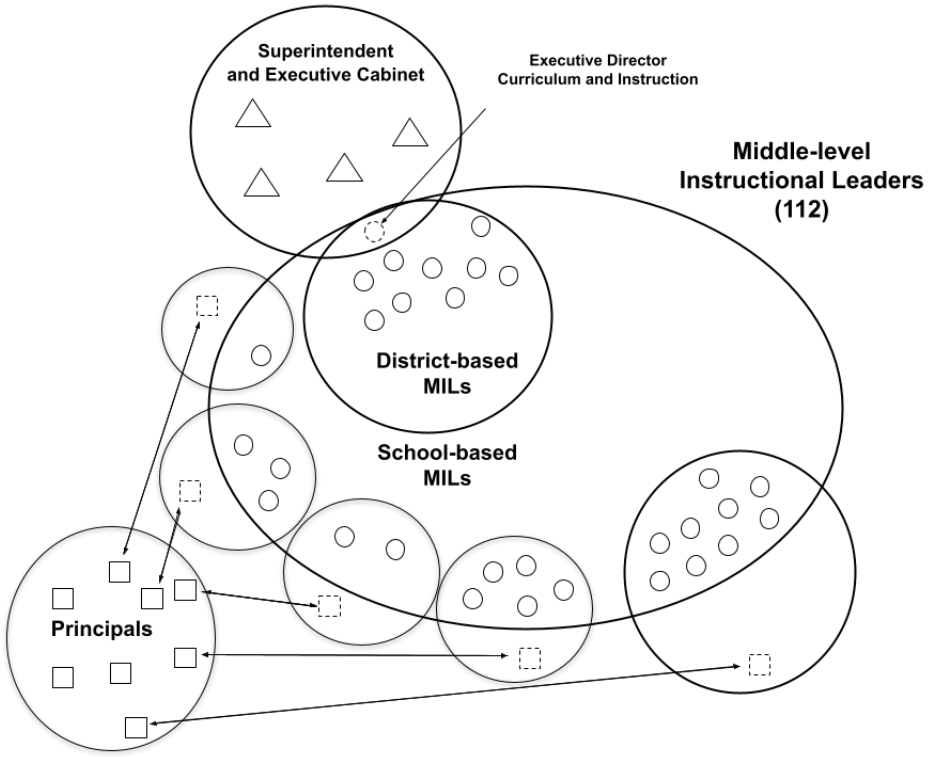
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	37	360
Elementary School	1 CIT	11.7	153
Elementary School	1 CIT, 1 PS	36	457
Elementary School	1 CIT, 1 PS	32.9	317
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	37	485
Elementary School	1 Math CIT	22	273
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	47	550
Elementary School	1 CIT, 1 PS	34.6	436
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	36	491
Elementary School	3 CIT, 1 PS	49	610
Elementary School	1 Math CIT	17.4	236
Elementary School	0	20.4	211
Elementary School	1 CIT	25	340
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	54	622
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	56	678
Elementary School	1 CIT, 1 PS	40	438
Elementary School	2 CIT, 1 PS	32.6	424
Middle School	2 VP, 3 DH	102	1332
Middle School	1 VP, 1 PS	53.5	590
Middle School	2 VP, 4 DH, 2 coaches, 1 PS	103	1317
High School	1 VP, 1 DH	34.5	100
High School	3 VP, 1 PS, 9 DH	123	1,466
High School	3 VP, 1 PS, 9 DH	129	2,012
High School	3 VP, 1 PS, 7 DH	119	1658

In sum, 112 MILs were accounted for and situated across Frederick. Figure 3.1 is a visual representation of how MILs (represented as circles) are structured within Frederick. The visual is not intended to represent all 112 positions, but rather how the positions are currently situated in learning together. As illustrated by a dashed line, the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction serves as a broker between the executive cabinet (triangles) and district MILs and

therefore supports with translating, coordinating, and aligning perspectives between each. Likewise, principals (squares) serve as brokers between the superintendent and their bounded school communities which include school-based MILs.

Figure 3.1:

Visual Representation of the MIL CoP



This number (112 distinct MILs) is significant when placed in the context of Frederick and its purpose of improving instructional leadership. Table 3.6 considers the ratio of instructional leaders to teachers within a district. When considering the superintendent and executive cabinet, the teacher to executive cabinet ratio is very high and likely unable to support individual teachers with direct support to improve their classroom practice. While that ratio decreases to 46.1 to 1 when principals are considered, the ratio still remains high. Only when MILs are factored into this comparison does the ratio become reasonable to directly support classroom instruction; 10.3 to 1 is actually better than Frederick's student to teacher ratio identified as 13.5 to 1 on the DESE

District School Profile webpage. In other words, Frederick is best primed to improve instructional leadership by providing direct support to the practice of teachers only when the 112 MILs who share responsibility are considered.

Table 3.6:

Frederick Ratio Comparison of Personnel

Instructional Leader	#	**Teacher to Instructional Leader Ratio (1152 Teachers)**
Executive Cabinet	7	164.6 to 1
Principals	25	46.1 to 1
MILS	112	10.3 to 1

In summary, district- and school-based MILs in Frederick comprise at least 78% of the instructional leaders within Frederick and serve in eight different and distinct roles and capacities. In the following section, I organize how MILs learn and pursue instructional leadership through vision, academic structures and processes, and people.

Instructional Leadership

MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis within particular CoPs - either as part of a district CoP or as part of a smaller, school CoP. This study investigates how members of both CoPs pursue and make sense of Hallinger's (2011) three specific yet indirect avenues of instructional leadership: vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people. Using learning capabilities, I describe the conditions of learning cultivated within each CoP and in each avenue.

Vision and Goals

One path through which MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership is through vision and goals. Vision refers to how a leader articulates the direction a school is moving, whereas goals are the indicators that determine this progress. I structure the findings using vision and goals first because of the impact this avenue has on academic structures and people. For the purpose of this study, I describe the conditions in which Frederick establishes vision and goal setting and how individual MILs also contribute to this process. Actual goals and priorities in Frederick are presented in the Academic Structures that improve classroom practice section, which is the subsequent section of findings.

External and Internal Factors. School districts and administrators in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, including MILs, are under the authority of The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) representing a strong traditional hierarchical power structure. According to the DESE District and School website, DESE evaluates the quality of districts and schools using five categories: achievement (in English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science), growth (on ELA and Mathematics assessments), high school completion (not applicable to elementary schools), English language proficiency, and additional indicators (including attendance and advanced coursework). Therefore, the ELA and Mathematics achievement and growth of all students, but especially of high needs' students, heavily inform the work of all instructional leaders in Frederick. MILs have a responsibility to attend to these metrics as they establish goals and pursue instructional leadership.

Alongside such external forces (i.e., DESE) that exert vertical accountability, internal structures influence the vision and goals that MILs seek as well. The executive cabinet – which includes the superintendent, deputy superintendents, Executive Director Curriculum and Instruction, and others – serves as the ultimate decision makers of the district and most closely

impacts the work of district-based MILs. One executive cabinet member, while describing the decision-making process in the district, notes

> "And if they [educators from the district] come and present… We would look at it, obviously bring in an [Assistant Director] if it was a content and if it was a supplemental or a resource that they were interested in. We would make a decision, and look at it as a pilot."

In order for any school or district leader within Frederick to implement a new program, district approval is required, representing a strong vertical accountability structure specifically related to how vision and goals are established in Frederick, and how this vision and goals impact the work district MILs are able to seek.

Similarly, school-based MILs validated the district's increasing stewardship and responsibility for driving the direction in which the school seeks to move. Every single school-based MIL referred to the district when describing the vision and goals of this academic school year. One Vice Principal noted

> "So I think that our instructional priorities right now are kind of just given to us by the district. It's not necessarily like we're coming together and kind of identifying our own goals. It's more of like, here's what [the superintendent] has decided is like a goal for the district."

One Department Head stated something similar, "one of our big pushes was higher order thinking, and they were decided by the district and handed down to us. And then we were the ones responsible for disseminating… and delivering that PD to our staff." One Curriculum Instruction Teacher stated "The city started bringing in all these brand new programs during the pandemic…. I think that everything that we have to do comes from the district."

Another internal structure exerting vertical accountability onto school-based MILs is the principal. School-based MILs' purpose for their own work was directly impacted by the partnership between them and the principal. One school-based MIL, when asked how much influence the principal has, noted "He's got a ton. He utilizes me like there's no tomorrow." He described his role as supporting the school with technology, building tables, and being a substitute teacher for an uncovered class. Evidence showed that vice principals also found the principal empowering them with instructional leadership. They appreciated this, "luckily this principal and the one before have really kind of been like, yeah, let's do this." School-based MILs' partnerships with the principal also affect how MILs pursue instructional leadership through the vision and goal setting process.

One outlier in the data worth mentioning is the impact one district MIL had on the direction Frederick is seeking during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the executive cabinet is responsible for making final decisions regarding resource adoption and determining the direction of the district, evidence indicates that a district MIL may have heavily influenced that decision. In an interview, an instructional coach notes "I began trying to educate myself on… Blended Learning… and started funneling them over to the curriculum department saying we need to start thinking this way." This individual's emergent ideas regarding professional learning, specifically adopting Blended Learning and moving learning to be "asynchronous" and "differentiated," has impacted the direction Frederick is moving, which directly impacts the vision and goals MILs are able to seek.

Individual Investment in Vision and Goals. Despite residing in a CoP with external and internal factors, MILs pursue instructional leadership by individually investing in a vision and taking steps to actualize that vision. This investment attends to the personal side of social learning

(citizenship) and hones in on areas and qualities that govern new learning within the CoP. Individual investment occured in spite of the external and internal factors noted above, chief among them the COVID-19 global pandemic.

One novel example of a school-based MIL invested in improving instructional leadership within their school was when a Vice Principal recognized a need and took the initiative to fill a gap in instructional leadership. This Vice Principal recognized that Department Heads were key stakeholders in improving teacher practice, noticed that they needed help with facilitating teacher meetings, and established a weekly Professional Learning Community (PLC) to model best practices for them. In the observance of one of these meetings, the Vice Principal developed a four week PLC rotation, modeled one of the protocols for Department Heads, asked Department Heads to facilitate this protocol with teachers, and asked them to share out how it went in PLC. One Department Head, when describing vulnerability, shared how this contributed to her new learning, “I was definitely apprehensive putting myself out there and sharing a lesson… but I actually got a lot more useful feedback than I figured I would because I thought I knew why it bombed.” Prior to this support, Vice Principals in this particular school focused more on student discipline and evaluated elective teachers. This Vice Principal charted a new direction in which the school seeks to move by empowering other school-based MILs to collectively learn with and through each other for the purpose of improving practice.

In order to chart a new direction, MILs conveyed the importance of being in tune with the strengths and areas of growth of CoP members (including themselves). An Assistant Director discussed how they became an instructional leader by reflecting on their own practice: “So a lot of learning to be an instructional leader was first realizing what I didn't know… they started putting me on these monitoring site visits… and I could see, over three days… all the variation.”

One Vice Principal conveyed this sentiment by acknowledging a Department Head's ability to "Recogniz[e] and utiliz[e] people's strengths." The Vice Principal acknowledged that leaders don't have to be "all knowing" but rather have the ability to go out and "get this information and bring it back." Lastly, a school-based MIL adamantly described "you have to seek out opportunities to improve yourself, to then be able to improve your, the people below you." Individual reflection on practice - both of their own and the practice of others - is an example of individual investment in vision and goals because it allows for MILs to set a direction and actualize said direction in a social learning space.

Another theme that emerged from multiple interviews related to vision and goal setting was the importance of individuals exhibiting creativity as they invest themselves in solving problems in unorthodox ways. This is especially the case during a global pandemic in which new challenges emerge frequently. Four MILs exhibited creativity by manipulating school schedules to address targeted goals. An interview with a senior leadership member noted "we've got a couple of new people that are bringing in new ideas, which we're like, You know what? We want to listen to that, and we want to foster that creativity." A district-based interviewee shared a story about implementing a new practice at a school level. "I bring a lot of ideas to the table because I have been everywhere. So I feel like when I bring something to the table, [the principal] is like, Let's try it and see if it works." MILs being provided the space for original ideas to percolate is an example of emergence governance, and this creates fertile ground to develop innovative social learning spaces.

In summary, the vision and goals of Frederick are heavily influenced by DESE and the executive cabinet, representing the traditional hierarchical accountability structure that exists in many public school districts. The partnership between principals and school-based MILs also

exert authority over the work that is accomplished by these particular instructional leaders. However, the impact of individual MILs' investment on vision and goals can supersede that of hierarchical accountability structures so long as MILs are provided the space to recognize a need, reflect on the practice of CoP members, and seek neoteric solutions to solving problems related to instructional leadership.

Academic Structures that Impact Teacher Practice

The next significant path through which MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership is by establishing academic structures to impact teacher practice. Academic structures and processes must be systemic to shape and enhance the practice of teachers. In this section, I present evidence that describes how MILs saw establishing these practices as their purpose, how they prioritized improving instruction, and highlight a particular practice - coaching - that they employed across Frederick.

Purpose. MILs in Frederick across both the district- and school-based CoPs described their role in instructional leadership as one that supports teachers with instruction. As one Assistant Director put it, the purpose of their role is "supporting teachers in implementing standards-aligned and culturally responsive [content] curriculum." Similarly, a school-based MIL characterized their job as "really helping hone our teachers' areas of growth… to become the best versions of themselves." One Vice Principal framed their purpose as "I think that our job is to work with teachers to help support them and guide them to make the best instructional choices for students to be successful." MILs in both CoPs communicated a clear responsibility to enhance teacher practice and this responsibility is connected to the partnership learning capability as it defines the "why" educators come together.

While the purpose to support teachers was clear, the actualization of that purpose differed, depending on if the MIL was part of the district or school CoP. District-based MILs spoke to "systems" when speaking about how to improve teacher practice; this systems thinking highlighted a distance between their partnerships with teachers. One Assistant Director noted

> "Most of my contact is with groups of teachers and these teams are tasked with a goal. [Examples include]... high quality resource adoption teams, [and] curriculum mapping teams. I will occasionally go into classrooms to just kind of, Hey, how's it going? but that's not from an evaluative perspective."

Another Assistant Director validated the finding that district MILs approach their work with teachers through a systems thinking approach: "I feel like we can fix broken things, connect things, and [get] people the things that they need." This district MIL also stated "We're still not close enough to instruction, and I always feel that gap and that distance." On one hand, district MILs communicated a purpose to support teacher's practice and are thus exhibiting instructional leadership. But on the other hand, they shared a feeling of being removed and distant from instruction, thus communicating a need to enhance teacher practice with a more systems-thinking approach.

Contrarily, school-based MILs referenced more proximal ways to enhance the practice of teachers which was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about how COVID impacted their work, one school-based MIL said "our roles have changed completely." He described in the previous year supporting teachers through small group pull outs during Zoom and this year substituting a class till the end of the year, supporting with technology rollout, and fixing desks. Two program specialists both described modifying the school schedule as a way to improve practice, which included introducing a "20/40" split as a way to ensure teachers

implemented specific instruction for English Learners, a subgroup that has disproportionately been impacted by the pandemic. Three school-based MILs described their work to improve classroom practice as doing "grade-level, standards-based work." One described this strategy as a "Framework for Success" and provided an example of a document that is used with teachers to unpack standards. While all MILs in Frederick believe their purpose is to enhance teachers, variance in the approach to accomplish this purpose exists, reflecting different partnerships that have been cultivated amongst these two CoPs.

Although a strong purpose to enhance teacher practice was evidenced by the data and MILs in both CoPs identified different academic structures as a way to do so, only one example emerged describing how district and school-based MILs interact. One Assistant Director, when describing a content-specific strategic plan, invited Department Heads to develop said plan, which was the only example of mutual engagement between and amongst district- and school-based MILs. The lack of joint enterprise and mutual engagement between district- and school-based MILs represents a key missing academic structure that can be used to shape or enhance the practice of teachers.

Priorities. The most prominent academic structure impacting teacher practice in Frederick during COVID-19 was the Blended Learning initiative. Every MIL who was interviewed referenced Blended Learning, the professional development provided district-wide by Modern Classrooms Project. This priority was received differently by various stakeholders. One district MIL described Blended Learning as a "big change" and labeled it as a "big focus of the conversation around instruction" because "teachers never had access [to technology] like they do now." A school-based MIL, speaking favorably, said, "It's amazing when it's done well." For instance, they continued, it allowed students in an inclusion math class to receive "a lot more one-

on-one instruction." A Vice Principal was similarly enthusiastic: "I think the Blended Learning piece is super great and the people that are running with it, I think are seeing success." She also mentioned concerns, however: "We have a lot of teachers who don't understand the front load of work in order for it to then be successful for years to come." Others expressed concerns, such as one math coach who reflected, "[I]t's not being received very well…[I]t's a lot of hard work… [and] teachers just feel like they're drowning." Despite the mixed reviews from MILs, Blended Learning was a significant academic structure stewarded by the executive cabinet. While MILs were expected to seek the agreement and alignment of teachers across Frederick, no evidence supports that there was a collective effort amongst district- and school-based MILs to do so.

The second most prominent academic structure enhancing teacher practice was "rigorous learning," although MILs within and across CoPs referenced this idea differently. Rigorous learning was referred to by the superintendent during the SY 21-22 Leadership Institute Powerpoint Presentation as well as outlined in the 2019-2024 District Strategic Plan. Four MILs from across both district and school-based CoPs spoke of "acceleration versus remediation" which according to a Department Head "birthed due to COVID." Acceleration versus remediation conveyed the expectation that teachers must continue to teach grade-level standards while providing scaffolds and support so that all students, including those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, can meet grade-level expectations. A district MIL referred to this priority as "depth of instruction." Four MILs talked about unpacking standards, and one Assistant Director described unpacking standards as "a concrete way to talk with teachers around holding all students to high expectations." Despite the idea of rigorous learning being stewarded by the strategic plan and emerging as the second most prominent priority impacting classroom practice, a common way to

speak about and actualize this practice across Frederick was missing, symbolizing a lack of joint enterprise and partnership in and across the MIL CoPs.

While Frederick MILs sought to implement Blended Learning and Rigorous Learning as academic structures to enhance teacher practice, the social-emotional well-being of teachers and students became an emergent and conflicting priority, and this overshadowed attending to instructional leadership. The Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction noted

> "We are struggling a little bit with the balance between right now, are we going full force with instruction? Or do we really need to stop and look at SEL? I know it needs to be a balance, but we're struggling with how much we push. People are at their wit's end in a lot of different areas. We have to hear that as leaders and we have to make sure that we're being responsive to it."

A district MIL also acknowledged "There's really an attention to the level of trauma that our students have experienced and how that is impacting their ability to succeed… And to be quite honest, the trauma that teachers have experienced." Because Covid–19 has exacerbated trauma within adults and students in schools, attending to social-emotional needs bubbled up as emergent governance. MILs had a responsibility to attend to the emerging needs of their teachers, students, and families by assessing the academic structures currently in place and adjusting when necessary to improve classroom practice.

Coaching. One common academic structure to enhance the practice of teachers at both the district and school level is the practice of coaching. The district has made a significant investment in coaching by investing in six coaches at the district level as well as investing in twenty-five Curriculum Instruction Teachers at the elementary level. One district coach, while reflecting on their experience, noted "When I first started coaching and we would walk into places, I feel like

people thought it was punitive…. Then we became a commodity," representing a change in perception by teachers. In speaking with a district coach, coaching practices at the district-level include using data to identify "lower performing schools," speaking with principals to "identify teachers that need support," and "implementing a three-week cycle." The coach described the mentoring cycle: "I usually model for the first week and the second week we kind of do like a co-teaching thing. And then the third week they kind of do their own thing." Coaches and Curriculum Instruction Teachers do not serve as evaluators because, as one coach stated, they are "technically considered a teacher." These horizontal accountability structures provide teachers with instructional support in a non-threatening manner and Frederick leverages coaching as a way to have MILs pursue instructional leadership.

However, coaching practices are not consistent across roles. For example, an Instructional Coach at the district-level is not responsible for coaching teachers at all, but rather "coordinating the district's initiative for blending learning" and facilitating professional learning. One Curriculum Instruction Teacher noted, "So, for me, my days are helping teachers who, "Hey… can you put this case together for me? Okay, I can do that. You know?" The role of coach (examples include Mathematics, Instructional, or Literacy) differ from that of the Curriculum Instruction Teacher, even though they are designed to function in the same way. The 3-week cycle that the mathematics coach uses to model for and the build capacity of teachers is not a consistent practice with all coaches and Curriculum Instruction Teachers. This inconsistency reflects a lack of vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, and a difference in how individuals invest in their work.

Another example of how coaching practices are not consistently implemented in Frederick lies between elementary schools and secondary schools. While coaches and Curriculum

Instruction Teachers do not serve as evaluators at the elementary level, Department Heads are responsible for serving as both a coach and evaluator for the teachers they evaluate in secondary schools. One Department Head noted that it is their responsibility to "coach the teachers and make them be the best teachers possible" but then stated "there's no coaches at the secondary level." The Department Head went further by stating "I also strongly believe that Department Heads should not have any teaching responsibilities; they currently teach two sections of a content class. This would allow for more coaching/modeling opportunities." Even if teachers at the secondary level receive coaching from their department head, they receive this coaching only through their evaluator representing a vertical accountability power structure. This power dynamic changes the nature of coaching at the secondary level to a vertical accountability structure, rather than a horizontal accountability structure that exists at the elementary school level, thus diminishing the effectiveness of the academic structure to support teachers at the secondary level.

In summary, district- and school-based MILs describe their partnership and approach to enhancing teachers' practice differently, and the lack of joint enterprise and mutual engagement between district- and school-based MILs represents a key missing academic structure that can be used to shape or enhance the practice of teachers. Blended Learning and rigorous instruction have been stewarded across Frederick as key academic structures to enhance teacher practice while social emotional well-being became an emergent and conflicting priority, and this overshadowed attending to instructional leadership. While a significant investment in coaching has been made in Frederick, the practices and responsibilities of coaches vary, and non-evaluative horizontal coaching structures are not accessible to secondary teachers.

People: Building Capacity

The final avenue through which MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership is by focusing on people. This focus on people can be described as building the capacity of others who can carry on the mission of improving student learning. In this section, the learning of MILs will be the focus by highlighting experiences that contribute to their practice, describing horizontal accountability structures, and reviewing the desire to align practice.

Workplace Experiences. Frederick has stewarded workplace experiences that build capacity by developing common language and expectations of their MILs. Frederick has a cohort of district and school-based MILs participating in the Lynch Micro-Academy (LMA). According to a district MIL CoP member, the purpose of the LMA is "to promote strong leadership strategies while helping coach teachers in building a common shared vision of instructions and academic excellence." The LMA offers each member 5 professional development sessions and 5 coaching sessions to each person enrolled. For example, one way in which LMA built the capacity of a Vice Principal was through the use of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Structure, which includes four protocols used to facilitate meetings with adults. The Vice Principal modeled the use of these protocols for Department Heads, recorded this modeling session, and submitted the recording to the LMA coach for feedback. Not only did this example allow the Vice Principal to reflect and develop their own practice, but it also focused on building the capacity of other school-based MILs.

Other established workplace experiences that support the learning of MILs include collaborative, experiential practices. One such experience described by an Assistant Director included "So I'd say the monitoring site visits, the rubrics that… changed over time… really taught me how to see a classroom and see what's going on with the classroom and be able to speak to it." One Program Specialist, when asked how they learned to be an instructional leader,

said " I think through practice and experiences….. I had a principal who really fostered those types of opportunities. I was invited to be on different teams like curriculum mapping, unpacking standards, and participating in PD like train the trainer models." A Department Head mentioned "shadowing a vice principal" as a way to "really open up my eyes" and "challenged me in all kinds of positive ways." Each of these collaborative experiential practices informally emerged from various partnerships. Each example represents a time when a leader fosters a partnership by recruiting someone that they believe is invested in their practice (citizenship) to participate in a collaborative experience (partnership), thus allowing for enculturation to ensue.

However, limitations have been expressed by MILs in regards to both workplace experiences above. When describing the LMA, one district-based MIL mentioned "It's very school leader focused and so having that district lens, I'm working to translate over... how do we marry [these practices] together for a district-wide project or work?" This MIL experienced some dissonance with regards to applying their learning to their district MIL role, thus expressing a lack of clarity with joint enterprise. One Vice Principal opined, "I just wish they could do more at one time, rather than only doing two from each school at a time." While these intentional practices are examples of how the executive cabinet of stewards governance to improve the practice of MILs, the enrollment of its first cohort of MILs are limited to two MILs per school, and every MIL does not have the same access to these learning experiences.

Similarly, there is ample evidence to support that collaborative, experiential learning practices for MILs occur too infrequently, and that COVID-19 has negatively impacted this frequency. The Executive Director of Curriculum, when referencing the development of a content-specific strategic plan (one example a collaborative experiential practice) stated "We are

going to do that with the other content areas… Oh, and then we had the pandemic." When speaking about collaboration amongst Assistant Directors, one MIL expressed hunger for more:

> "I want more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues [and] improve instruction. I mean, I think that our collaboration only enhances the outcomes for these students and our ability to leverage each other's strengths and come together as a community."

One school-based MIL acknowledged "There was some movement to try to bring us together before COVID," but now Program Specialists collaborate "basically hardly ever." Another school-based MIL expressed this same desire, "I would love for us to go and do observations together and collect and calibrate our feedback." The emergence of the global pandemic has hindered the ability for MILs to pursue instructional leadership through effective partnerships.

Variance in Role Expectations. While all MILs have a responsibility to pursue instructional leadership, both district and school-based MILs spoke to variance in role expectations. This variance complicates the ability to improve the practice of MILs as instructional leaders because the ambiguity clouds the ways in which MILs in each role should be improving student learning.

Program Specialists described the widest variance in roles and responsibilities. As one Program Specialist lamented,

> "The name program specialist is given to lots of individuals that have different responsibilities in the district… there are program specialists in the curriculum office and there are program specialists in the middle schools, but we all do not do the same thing. And I think that even program specialists from school to school have different roles. So even though we all have this title, we're all not necessarily doing the same thing, which is often a challenge."

Many are also responsible for evaluating teachers and some are responsible for completing school-based functions, such as data analysis and coordinating assessments. They are located in both the district CoP and school-based CoPs.

Assistant Directors, many of which are responsible for curriculum content areas (Physical Education K-12, ELA K-6, Science K-12, Humanities, etc.) expressed variance in evaluation expectations. Some Assistant Directors evaluate teachers, some evaluate Early College Coordinators, and some do not evaluate at all. In addition, some are responsible for overseeing specific programs.

MILs also conveyed variability with Coaches and Curriculum Instruction Teachers, roles technically designated to provide direct support to teachers. One Instructional Coach, when contrasting their own role with other mathematics coaches, conveyed a difference between the two roles, “They’re based at schools and they’re collaborating with teachers directly…whereas I’m working at the district level for principals… designing and delivering PD.” While one coach facilitates professional development and manages district partnerships (Blended Learning, etc.), others work closely with teachers and implement coaching cycles to help improve classroom practice. One Curriculum Instruction Teacher was responsible for coordinating school assessments, managing 1 to 1 technology, and substituting for vacant teacher positions.

One Vice Principal prefaced their description of their own role with, “So when I tell you what my job is, it’s not necessarily what the other two VPs are doing. I really want to be an instructional leader.” This Vice Principal further expressed variance, “I just don't think that we're on the same page with what the job description is.” Expectations include evaluation, student discipline, and school operations. One Vice Principal took it upon themselves to build the

capacity of other school leaders (i.e. Department Heads). This individual expressed variance not only in responsibilities, but in individual practice too.

The Department Head role had the least amount of variance in role description, but most amount of variability in practice. They serve as evaluators of teachers in specific content areas in secondary schools. They also teach 2 classes and facilitate teacher PLC meetings. In terms of practice, one Vice Principal described one Department Head as "one of the strongest instructional leaders that I know in the district" but also said, "our Department Heads are very lacking in their leadership abilities and their instructional leadership abilities."

This variance in both job responsibilities and individual practice led MILs to express a strong desire to align and calibrate their work. One district-based MIL stated,

> "[T]he intention of that district strategic plan was to unify us on objectives and initiatives and a vision. It's not referred to; it doesn't seem like it's guiding our next steps so it's almost like MILS need some unification on a common instructional vision to drive our strategic next steps."

As stated earlier, one school-based MIL expressed "I would love for us to go and do observations together and collect and calibrate our feedback." One Program Specialist, when describing how to improve instructional leadership amongst MILs, stated "redefine [the role] so that it's more specific to what is actually being done… and to calibrate it."

In summation, Frederick engages in some exemplary practices that develop the instructional leadership practices of MILs (such as fostering workplace and collaborative experiences) and a strong desire to increase alignment of practices and horizontal accountability structures exist especially in response to COVID-19. Evidence shows that lack of alignment in these roles existed before the pandemic, and the pandemic has exacerbated the misalignment.

Table 3.7 shows the responsibilities of each role below: an X denotes responsibilities that are shared amongst all roles; and S denotes the responsibilities that only some MILs within a particular role have. As one would expect to note, it is more common for responsibilities to not be shared amongst members with the same title than it is the opposite.

Table 3.7:

Responsibilities delineated by Role

Responsibilities	**Middle-level Instructional Leader Positions**					
	Assistant Director	Coach	Program Specialist	Vice Principal	Curriculum Instruction Teacher	Department Head
Evaluate MILs				S		
Evaluate Teachers	S		S	S		X
Oversee Curriculum and Procure Resources	S					
Serve as a Program Coordinator	S	S	S			
Coach Teachers		X			X	S
Design Professional Development		S				
Facilitate Professional Development		S	S	S		S
Facilitate Teacher Meetings						
Manage School Operations (Master Schedule, Assessments, etc)		S	S	S	S	S

Discussion

This individual study examined how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis. Using learning capabilities to understand two specific CoPs within Frederick – district- and school-based MILs – the data revealed at least 112 MILs operating in different capacities to support instructional leadership within Frederick. Through this analysis, three core themes emerged. First, although traditional hierarchical accountability structures (namely DESE, the executive cabinet, and principals) influence the vision and goals MILs seek to pursue, individual investment supersedes the impact that these structures have on MILs' vision and goals. MILs were able to chart a different path forward than those established by the hierarchical power structure through awareness and creativity. Second, the academic structures and processes stewarded across Frederick to enhance teacher practice include Blended Learning and rigorous instruction, while the social emotional well-being of students and teachers was emergent during COVID-19, and these two were a conflicting priority at times. District and school-based MILs approach their work to enhance the practice of teachers differently, and coaching practices are not enacted similarly for all teachers. Third, workplace experiences and collaborative and experiential practices are amongst the exemplary practices that Frederick has to develop the capacity of MILs. However, limited enrollment capacity, lack of frequency of experiences, and ambiguous role expectations hinder the ability to develop the practice of MILs. These findings shed light on how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

While this study contributes to the body of research related to MILs, professional learning, and instructional leadership, limitations exist. First, this research study occurred during a global pandemic, and pandemic-related demands impinged on the ability to procure the number of interviews and observations that was originally planned. Of the 112 MILs in Frederick, I was able

to secure ten MIL interviews, which is slightly less than 10%. Data collected about MILs' practice may not be a true representation of the entire district and school-based CoP. Additionally, generalizability may also be a challenge, given that variance in MIL positions exist across districts. However, triangulation and the use of interview data from teachers, principals, and the superintendent collected by my dissertation-in-practice group members corroborated these findings which provided for a rich description of both district- and school-based MIL CoPs.

I now turn to discuss the implications these findings have for practice and policy - particularly for districts experiencing crisis. I then discuss implications for future research.

Implications on Practice and Policy

In this study, I consider the role MILs - both district- and school-based instructional leaders - have on vision and goals, academic structures that impact classroom practice, and structures that improve their own capacity. I used Wenger's (2009) social learning capability as a means to understand how these CoPs organize and cultivate learning across a complex social system. Using social learning capability allowed me to highlight social innovations as well as missed opportunities for MILs to address large-scale challenges that emerged during COVID-19.

I found district- and school-based MILs consistently articulated the priorities of Frederick, which during COVID-19, included Blended Learning, Rigorous Learning, and social emotional well-being of its members. However, their specific goals (i.e. learning targets) to actualize said priorities are ambiguously defined. It is unclear the role MILs have to ensure that the vision of the district is actualized and how they are monitoring their progress to do so. One implication to practice moving forward is to unpack each district goal by outlining the specific responsibilities MILs (at both the school and district level) as well as their colleagues (superintendent, principals, and teachers) have in actualizing these goals.

When attending to the specific responsibilities of MILs to support district-wide implementation of priorities, attention to the individual practice and investment of MILs has the potential to spark new ways to improve instructional leadership. This study provides many examples of MILs contributing to the development of innovative social learning spaces (including building the capacity of team members, maximizing a master schedule, etc.) by being in tune to MILs' practice, exhibiting creativity, and taking steps to fill a recognized gap in instructional leader. In order to increase the pursuance of instructional leadership by MILs, it would be incumbent upon DESE, district leaders, and principals to adjust the evaluation policies that exist and find a way to qualify and assess MILs' individual practice, including investment. Currently, MILs are required to establish student learning goals and professional practice goals but an analysis of their individual investment is not part of this process.

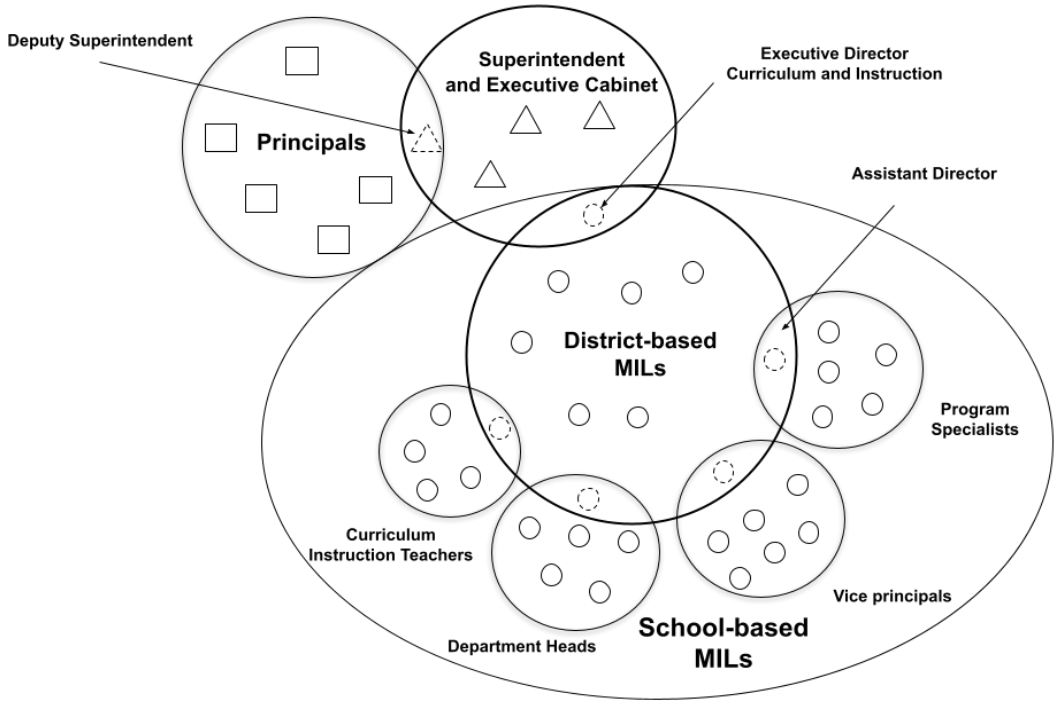
In addition to individual investment, an intentional plan to enhance the practice of CoP members amongst district and school-based MILs is worth pursuing. As stated, variance in job roles and responsibilities complicates the ability to improve the practice of MILs as instructional leaders. A lack of horizontal accountability structures, further exacerbated by COVID-19, has led to a misalignment of practice for district- and school-based MILs. For example, some Program Specialists operate as Vice Principals, yet two different titles exist. Instructional coaches have different responsibilities than Curriculum Instruction Teachers. This work has begun by introducing Lynch Micro-Academies. Normalizing effective practices within Frederick can increase accountability, and eliminate the ambiguity as it relates to the responsibilities to improve instructional leadership across a district.

One way to normalize effective practices within Frederick is to restructure the way district and school-based MILs mutually engage in joint enterprise. While principals should continue to

have the authority to flexibly utilize MILs to directly support the teachers within their schools, principals cannot and should not be solely responsible for stewarding the learning of MILs, especially during times of crisis. Therefore, district-level MILs should have a responsibility of establishing horizontal accountability to cultivate conditions of learning that extend beyond one school. This will allow school-based MILs to share best practices and learn from each other how to best support teachers with teaching and learning. Figure 3.2 is a visual representation of a potential collaborative MIL structure.

Figure 3.2:

Visual Representation of a Collaborative MIL Structure



In the figure above, district-based MILs serve as key brokers (represented as dotted circles) to cultivate the conditions of learning for school-based MILs. In order for this to work, district MILs would need to cohere and flesh out the effective practices of instructional leaders. They will support importing and exporting learning amongst school-based MILs which allows for best practices to develop in and across CoPs overtime. This would allow for MILs to calibrate and learn across school boundaries, which was a desire expressed in interviews.

Implications for Research

This study also yielded important implications for research regarding how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time. District and school MIL CoPs play a pivotal role in carrying out the vision and goals of the district, enhancing teacher practice, and

increasing the capacity of leadership. There is unleashed power in the potential these leaders have to affect change. The learning capabilities allowed me to focus on the process of MIL CoPs becoming a learning system, understand why and how MILs come together in practice, hone in on the vertical and horizontal accountability structures, and investigate how MILs invest in their own learning. This study illustrates one attempt to use the learning capabilities as a theoretical lens for unpacking how MILs learn in CoPs - and future research could explore this further.

One area to explore are the challenges that prevent horizontal accountability structures to exist amongst MILs. Power was exerted vertically through DESE, executive cabinet members, and the principals which stewarded governance within Frederick. However, horizontal accountability structures were non-existent, and variance in practice emerged through the lack of partnerships that exist within the organization. A study that explores these challenges will allow districts to intentionally dismantle these so that MILs can be capitalized.

Moreover, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2010) identified having a leadership learning continuum, providing learning experiences that develop practice, and developing structures that allow colleagues to learn and grow together as exemplary district practices. MILs articulated a strong desire to engage in learning together and acknowledged that structures to learn together are rare. This study confirms the need for districts to intentionally articulate a plan to develop MILs and that plan should include both a consideration of the district's plan to develop MILs and also how individuals' investment is a factor. A study connecting the exemplary practices outlined by Darling-Hammond and colleagues and how they are connected to individual investment would shed light on the ways to enhance the practice of MILs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my study investigated how MILs pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during a time of crisis by understanding MILs as distinct CoPs within a district identified as Frederick. The aim of the study was to use learning capabilities as a way to understand how learning is cultivated within and among MILs so that these positions can be best maximized within CoPs. As stated earlier, MILs play a crucial role in developing and maintaining the quality of students' learning experiences, and yet, a gap in research still exists in regards to how to capitalize on the many MIL roles that exist. If school districts want to maintain urgency and progress towards instructional leadership, especially in a time with so many competing interests in conflict due to the global pandemic, it is time to eliminate the gap and attend to the learning of the positions that are strategically embedded across multiple CoPs. Developing learning spaces for MILs will establish the fertile grounds necessary for innovatively pursuing instructional leadership.

CHAPTER FOUR[4]

Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

Our study explored the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership during a time of crisis within the Frederick district. Given that school districts are quintessential examples of social learning spaces, we used social learning theory–namely Communities of Practice (CoP)–as a conceptual framework for examining professional learning and instructional leadership. We drew upon the three main components of a CoP: joint enterprise (a collective understanding of purpose and direction); shared repertoire (shared routines, tools, and ways of doing things); and mutual engagement (ways of interacting and establishing belonging). To ground our understanding of instructional leadership, we used Hallinger's (2011) definition, which includes three "avenues or paths" (p. 129) that connect leadership to learning: vision and goals, academic structures and processes that support classroom practice, and people whose leadership builds the capacity of others. Our study answered two questions. The first investigated what professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district. The second examined how the learning of instructional leaders in a district was bounded and/or intertwined. Because we collected data in the fall of 2021, the third school year impacted by COVID-19, our research embeds crisis into our inquiry.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Frederick, each team member focused on a different level within the organization. Hosmer (2022) studied teacher professional learning and how principals create the conditions for that learning. Pires (2022) studied how middle-level instructional leaders (MILs) pursue and make sense of instructional leadership. Clark (2022) studied the roles autonomy plays in how principals prioritize curricular goals and support

[4] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne R. Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, and Mario Pires.

instruction. Erickson (2022) studied how the superintendent can increase organizational commitment. This approach allowed us to consider connections and tensions regarding instructional leadership and professional learning amongst various levels in Frederick.

Our group case study was bounded by three conditions. We were interested in studying a diverse district trying to address inequities in the impact of the crisis; therefore, Frederick was appropriate because it is a district with a wide range of student demographics. We wanted to study a district where the superintendent had been in their role for at least two years so that instructional initiatives were in place; Frederick's superintendent has been in his role for four years. Finally, Frederick served as a strong site for this study because it was a medium-sized district with enough MILs to address or research questions.

In this chapter, we first discuss how the findings from our individual studies cohere to answer our two collective questions. We then describe implications for practice, policy, and future research.

RQ1: What do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership?

To answer our first research question, we return to Hallinger's three avenues for instructional leadership and detail what learning and instructional leadership look like for teachers, MILs, and principals within Frederick. Hallinger (2011) presents three avenues through which leadership is linked to learning. First, *vision* signifies where the school or district seeks to move; *goals* refer to benchmarks indicating progress toward the vision. The second avenue is the *academic structures and processes* that systematically shape teacher practices to improve classroom instruction. The third avenue, *people,* refers to building the capacity of individuals to carry the mission of improving student learning forward. These three avenues affect educators at all levels in a district. In the subsections that follow, we trace how goals and vision, academic

structures, and building capacity for professional learning influenced the experience of teachers, MILs, principals, and the superintendent in Frederick during the pandemic.

Goals and Vision

The data related to goals and vision revealed a traditional hierarchy from the district, or superintendent, level down to principals, MILs, and teachers. The district strategic plan in particular shaped the culture for both professional learning and instructional leadership. All educators – principals, MILs, and teachers – were expected to align their personal goals with the district's goals. More specifically, the district allowed flexibility and personalization in how each educator's goals were linked to the larger organization, but required a "perceptible link" to district goals. One district administrator described the expectation as a "throughline;" there needn't be exact alignment, but there should be a "thread" tying each individual's goals to one or more of the district goals. Principals substantiated this claim, providing evidence of stewarding governance. For example, one principal talked about the merits of the district ushering in more horizontal goal alignment. This principal said, "we had a lot of autonomy [in creating our goals] before this current superintendent, and I do love that [the superintendent] has kind of brought on a district-wide approach to things, which isn't a bad thing." Some principals thus affirmed the efficacy of clearly defined foci for joint enterprise to drive the district's instructional goals and vision.

To that end, district leaders consistently connected their instructional goals and vision to student achievement data, particularly data revealing the achievement of ELs. Documents reviewed revealed that Frederick has over 36% ELs during the current 2021-2022 school year (more than triple the state average). The 2021 data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) revealed ELs performed below the state average in reading with only 4% meeting or exceeding expectations in grades 3-8. When the superintendent developed his

entry plan, he brought to light that "there is a noticeable gap in performance outcomes between English Learners and native English speakers…the gap among these groups persists in nearly every measurable category, but most notably in MCAS outcomes, graduation, and dropout rates." The superintendent talked about educators at all levels of the organization understanding what the vision and goals are, explaining, "everybody knows what the challenges are here." In his view, the goals and vision were clear at the district level at each level of the organization.

Consequently, the superintendent stated that he does not get pushback on goals, he attributed principals' investment to how goals were aligned with the strategic plan, as he expounded, "[Principals] usually are very supportive and [have] bought into those goals…the goals align with the strategic plan, which reflects a deep, input-driven conversation that was had three and a half years ago." The process in which the plan was developed valued feedback, buy in, and consensus. A review of the superintendent's student learning goals over the last three years revealed they were very similar (Frederick Superintendent Goals: 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021). The consistency of goals over the course of the pandemic suggested that the superintendent recognized more time was needed to make progress because of the emergent demands of the crisis.

Over the course of the three school years of the pandemic, principals had varying levels of control over their goals and vision for instructional leadership and professional learning at the school level. March of 2020 was a period in which schools were forced to transition to remote learning, but to do so quickly and with extremely limited resources. The district relied on school leaders to improvise. As a result, principals had more control over the joint enterprise and shared repertoire of their school CoPs. In 2020-2021, the district leadership more intentionally sought innovative practices to bridge from the school CoPs to the district CoP. In 2021-2022, both

district leaders and principals described a pendulum swing back to district control of goals and vision for instructional leadership as the district introduced Blended Learning and Hope and Healing as instructional foci. Some principals appreciated the coherence, but others resisted the forced calibration.

MILs also played a crucial role in carrying out the district's goals for professional learning and instructional leadership. While DESE's authority over districts and administrators represents a strong hierarchical vertical power structure, internal structures influence the vision that MILs seek as well as the goals MILs set. These internal structures include the executive cabinet and principals. MILs validated the district's increasing stewardship and responsibility for driving the direction in which the district or individual school seeks to move. School-based MILs also noted the impact principals had on their work, also representing vertical accountability.

While most of the evidence showed that during this time of crisis, Frederick's strategic plan drove goals for professional learning and instructional leadership, one outlier in the data worth mentioning is the influence one MIL had outside of the strategic plan. This instructional coach, a district MIL, reported overseeing the district-wide Blended Learning initiative. Because he was responsible for professional learning in the district, he said he recommended this particular model of Blended Learning and wanted professional learning to be more asynchronous and differentiated. He further explained that this design was intentional, as he sought to model the practices and ideals most prominent in Blended Learning. The district endorsed his recommendation, although our data revealed many teachers, MILs, and principals questioned the efficacy of the approach.

Finally, data revealed that the district's strategic plan also shaped teachers' experience of professional learning and instructional leadership. Under the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation

System, educators define a student learning and a professional practice goal every one to two years, depending on their professional status.One teacher reported that the district provided goal options; teachers could choose one of those options or make their own goals as long as they were connected to district improvement goals. Participant teachers explained that even when they constructed their own goals, the goals reflected the district's shared focus, or joint enterprise. For example, three teachers talked about personal goals focused on literacy, particularly the needs of ELs. These goals were clearly tied to district improvement goals.

Academic Structures

Hallinger's (2011) second avenue for instructional leadership is the academic structures that "shape or enhance the practice of teachers" (p.133). The structures, or shared repertoire, existing within Frederick have distinct outcomes for each of the roles within our study and again shaped the experience of professional learning and instructional leadership at every level.

The structure most impactful for teachers and their instructional practices was the pacing map. During a grade-level observation and through interviews, our research team found that teachers identified district pacing maps (curriculum guides indicated when each standard should be taught) a key component shaping their decision-making. However, evidence showed attention to what would be taught and when, with little focus on how.

Our data also revealed that the district provided two additional structures created in response to COVID-19 that also influenced teachers' decision making and connected them to district approaches to professional learning. One, Blended Learning, was structured as independent learning modules. Some staff completed these modules in the summer, allowing for time during the school year to focus on instructional planning, while other staff had to complete

the modules during the school year. This difference in some cases created distance between teachers and instructional leaders.

The final, and perhaps least impactful structure on teachers' ability to create a shared repertoire that reflected district or school priorities for instructional leadership was school staff meetings. Pre-pandemic staff meetings included time for collaboration and discussion of school-based work. Teachers reported that during the pandemic, school-based staff meetings occurred inconsistently across Frederick and appeared to become more about information sharing than an opportunity for in-depth work on instruction.

Similar to the experience of teachers, the data revealed that there were both effective and ineffective structures in Frederick connecting MILs to professional learning and instructional leadership. MILs in Frederick across both the district and school-based CoPs demonstrated joint enterprise by describing their role in instructional leadership as one that supported teachers with instruction. However, district and school-based MILs pursued their work with teachers differently. District-based MILs were responsible for the procurement of resources and typically communicated new initiatives through the school principals. In contrast, most school-based MILs supported teachers through evaluation, coaching, or through mutual engagement in Professional Learning Time meetings. Teachers were participants within the structure, whereas MILs had a responsibility for implementing and shepherding the structure.

MILs highlighted coaching as an important structure for their work and for the advancement of teachers' instructional practices. Although the district has invested significantly in coaching through district coaches and school-based Curriculum Instruction Teachers, the role of coaches varies widely. At no time do MILs who provide coaching come together to share, reflect, and refine their own practices in their own CoP. At the high school level, department

heads are responsible for both coaching and evaluation; the resulting tension between these contradictory methods for providing feedback to teachers diminished school-based MILs' ability to effectively coach.

Principals made note of Blended Learning and the Wednesday early release days, and the majority of principals identified these structures as negatively affecting their work. Ironically, while the district's intent was for these structures to provide principals with time to support teachers' practice, principals experienced these structures as limiting, not enhancing, their ability to support teachers. This negative effect on principals' instructional leadership was corroborated by teachers, who reported that the district had a more significant impact on their learning than did building principals.

In addition, five of the seven principals defined the boundaries of their school CoPs by describing unique, building-based structures, such as instructional tools they independently developed that supported instruction. Principals also talked about experimenting with new structures to support instruction during the crisis, such as a new family communication structure or a new professional development structure. In this sense, while they connected to the district's larger structures for instructional leadership and professional learning, principals also asserted their own structures during this period of crisis.

This tension between district-driven structures for instructional leadership and professional learning and school-driven structures was a consistent theme in our data. While the superintendent identified the crisis of COVID-19 as a time for innovation, principals experienced initiative overload. Principals indicated that much of the work to be done was directed by the district, impacting their building-based decisions and making prioritizing needs a challenge. Time, or lack thereof, became an obstacle for both teachers and principals as they navigated how

to implement district initiatives and simultaneously be responsive to the student needs created as a result of the pandemic.

Building Capacity

Hallinger's (2011) third and final avenue for instructional leadership, people, refers to the professional learning that develops educators' ability to support student learning. Our research team found many commonalities among educators' learning experiences at different levels in the district, both in what supported and in what failed to support educators' learning.

Central to all educators' learning during the pandemic was the need to adjust instructional expectations because of students' social emotional needs. COVID-19 influenced how teachers prioritized the social and emotional health of their students. Similarly, MILs from across the district commonly spoke about attending to the social emotional needs of teachers and students as vital, to the point where this concern overshadowed other aspects of instructional leadership. Principals also described supporting teachers to adjust their instructional expectations given students' developmental gaps.

Educators at all levels in Frederick also emphasized the role of innovation and reflection in their learning during this period of crisis. Teachers referenced exploring social media to get ideas and experimenting with different instructional practices on their own. Similarly, principals characterized their learning to be instructional leaders as predominantly a process of improvising, reflecting, and adapting. Principals talked particularly about learning by experimenting with new structures, or shared repertoire, to support instruction during the crisis, as detailed above. MILs described learning through hands-on, workplace experiences that helped them develop common language and expectations. MILs also talked about the importance of exhibiting creativity and taking the initiative to solve problems.

In contrast, principals and teachers reported that the district's structured professional development experiences had a limited influence on their learning. The district sought to build the capacity of all principals as instructional leaders by framing the instructional work; offering timely, formative feedback to principals; and providing meaningful, structured professional development experiences. Less than half of the principals interviewed described these supports as helpful. Principals also described Blended Learning as taking away from the instructional priorities and structures, or the joint enterprise and shared repertoire, that they had established in their school CoPs. Principals reported that mutual engagement activities supported their connection to the district CoP, but district-stewarded asynchronous initiatives hindered the learning of principals.

Similarly, teachers reported that formalized, district learning experiences had little significance to their learning. Only one teacher described Blended Learning as beneficial; all other teachers interviewed thought it not a good use of time. As stated above, Frederick has made a significant investment in coaching for teachers, but this investment has had questionable outcomes.

MILs had varying opinions on the effect of structured professional learning opportunities on their learning. Not all MILs had access to formal learning opportunities like the Lynch Leadership Micro Academy, and MILs expressed a desire for more formal opportunities to collaborate with their peers. Similar to other educators in the district, the MILs interviewed had disparate opinions about the efficacy of Blended Learning. Some MILs expressed enthusiasm for the initiative; others expressed concerns and described it as having limited impact. Finally, as was the case with principals, MILs reported that opportunities to come together built mutual engagement within their CoP, however those opportunities were too infrequent.

In sum, professional learning and instructional leadership in Frederick during this time of crisis looked hierarchical in terms of goals and vision, had some effective and some ineffective academic structures, and some effective and some ineffective approaches to building capacity. In general, our research revealed that the district CoP demonstrated strong joint enterprise and mutual engagement, but a less coherent approach to shared repertoire. We now turn to answering our second research question.

RQ2: How is the learning of instructional leaders bounded and/or intertwined?

Our research team's analysis of the data found learning to be bounded (to have defined boundaries) and intertwined (to have interconnection across boundaries) in three domains: Blended Learning, Rigorous Instruction, and Principal Autonomy.

Blended Learning

Blended Learning, a district priority introduced at a February 2021 School Committee, was described by the Superintendent as "a thoughtful integration of instruction in the virtual world along with traditional educational instruction." (School Committee, February 11, 2021). Starting in the 2020-2021 school year, four teams of teachers (elementary science, math, ELA, and secondary team) were trained and created blended learning units, asynchronous lessons, and resources that could be used districtwide. During the first half of the 2021-2022 school year, the district rolled out training for all educators. The majority of the professional learning consisted of asynchronous modules that educators completed on their own.

Our research team documented a tension around Blended Learning and the degree to which it created opportunities in Frederick for learning to be intertwined. District leadership and some MILs felt Blended Learning was a strong approach for creating intertwined joint enterprise

and shared repertoire. However, some MILs, the majority of principals, and all teachers questioned the approach.

Principals and MILs completed the modules in the summer before the 2021-2022 school year, whereas teachers completed it during the school year. The district instituted a universal early release for students on Wednesdays to give teachers the time to complete the modules; however, that time, according to the majority of principals interviewed, took away from time principals previously had to work with teacher teams on data inquiry and teacher practice. As a result, the majority of participant principals felt the Blended Learning initiative took away from school-based joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

This model also limited the opportunity for principals and MILs to mutually engage in instructional priorities with teachers, often creating a solitary learning experience. While teachers were not required to actively teach in this manner in 2021-2022, they were required to develop one lesson. Because some educators completed the training in the summer and others completed the training asynchronously during the school year, principals' and MILs' responsibility to support teacher implementation during the school year was unclear. Participant teachers described Blended Learning as mostly a waste of time. In sum, our research team found boundaries dividing teacher learning from leadership intentions as it relates to Blended Learning.

Rigorous Instruction

A second example of how learning of educators at different levels vis-a-vis instructional leadership is bounded and intertwined is the area of rigorous instruction. Frederick's improvement plan names "provid[ing]engaging, relevant, and rigorous learning experiences that support each student and educator in reaching their fullest potential" (District Strategic Plan, 2019-2024) as a core strategic objective. Our research team used the term "Rigorous Instruction" to refer to this

priority. The data revealed that educators throughout the district made reference to this concept in varying ways.

For example, MILs had multiple ways of talking about rigorous instruction and included different routines and tools, which impacted the level of shared repertoire and mutual engagement. For example, “acceleration versus remediation,” a phrase that four MILs used reflecting a DESE tool provided to districts to support learning recovery during COVID-19, was one way MILs sought alignment across all classrooms to focus on grade-level content. Bloom’s taxonomy was yet another way a department head spoke to rigor, while a vice principal described rigorous learning as being “skills-focused.” A principal and a program specialist spoke to a “Framework of Success” as a way teachers interact with developing lessons that reflect grade-level expectations. On one hand, evidence suggested that rigorous instruction was an example of joint enterprise, since this concept was intertwined throughout the district. On the other hand, teachers, MILs, and principals all approached rigorous instruction differently, using different language and in some cases varying repertoire. Thus, we found practices for rigorous instruction bounded in terms of mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

As detailed above, one way the district attempted to steward rigorous instruction was by using pacing maps. At the elementary level, all five teachers talked about the high needs of their students and a commitment to supporting students in learning grade-level concepts. Teachers reflected that they meet students’ needs and support expected outcomes by focusing on the grade-level standards and by following district-issued pacing maps. There was a consensus among teachers that literacy was a priority, reflecting clear joint enterprise. Similarly, a district MIL described these maps as focusing on priority standards and keeping teachers on track. According to the teachers interviewed, the principals were also intertwined with the district through the use

of pacing maps, as one teacher noted "basically, everything that [the principal] puts in front of us, he gets from the district." The use of pacing maps demonstrates one way that rigorous instruction was intertwined throughout Frederick.

However, although the intention of the pacing maps in Frederick was that everyone used them, thus intertwining the learning among teachers (horizontally) and through layers of the district (vertically), we also found evidence that pacing maps were not an effective strategy for intertwining the learning of instructional leaders. There was no evidence that these maps were co-constructed or that they were created with teacher input. Some principals also spoke about adjusting pacing maps, providing "grace" when necessary. The superintendent told a member of our research team "I think grace is important, but I'm super careful about using that word because some see it as lowering expectations." However, principals talked about having to use "grace" and compassion to make daily choices about how much to push teachers and how much to buffer expediency. One principal described their agency in this regard: "We have the [district] curriculum map [but] we're not going to go in each class and say …'This has got to get done because the district is going to be all over my back' … We're extremely supportive." Another principal similarly stated: "I find myself giving people permission. It's okay if you've run into your science block and you need to extend the ELA a little longer. …having that compassion for folks and giving them grace when they need it." This finding further suggests that the pacing map tool was less effective at intertwining shared repertoire than intended.

In sum, rigorous instruction lent itself to both bounded and intertwined learning. While a collective purpose and direction was expressed to increase the rigor of the learning, a lack of shared routines (shared repertoire) and inconsistent interactions (mutual engagement) complicated the ways the districts' learning was bounded and intertwined.

Principal Autonomy

Finally, our investigation of principal autonomy revealed multiple ways in which the learning in Frederick was both bounded and intertwined.

Principals defined their membership in the district CoP by naming elements connected to mutual engagement. All seven principals talked about the superintendent creating a culture that values principal voice and values collaboration and connection, both between principals and district administrators and among principal colleagues. Principals reported being asked to participate in district committees or to serve as principal mentors. These experiences allowed them to participate in intertwined experiences, between layers of the organization.

As discussed above, instructional goals for principals were both intertwined with the overarching goal of the district CoP and had distinct boundaries. Three principals echoed the language our research team observed the superintendent using in his August opening meeting: "principals have the autonomy" to personalize their instructional goals based on specific school data, but "there must be a perceptible link to the district's overarching strategic plan objectives." One principal stated that priorities are "handed down [from the] district level but within that [we adjust] to our needs...what we need as a school community as opposed to [another school] across the district." The expectation seemed to be that principals would bridge what was applicable to their school CoP and buffer what was not.

In their descriptions of their school's shared repertoire, the unique tools or structures that formed the boundaries of their school CoPs, principals often talked about support from the district in a way that illustrated how the school CoPs and the district CoP were intertwined. For example, one principal talked about how the district assistant director for math helped shape their school CoP's framework for breaking down standards and translating them into lesson plans. Similarly,

both principals and district administrators gave examples of innovative practices before the pandemic that started at the level of an individual school CoP and then bridged to the district CoP. For example, one principal stated that, having experienced the power of creating an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) in another district, they intentionally brought that structure to their school CoP, modeled it for others, and then supported its replication across Frederick.

Finally, our research documented that there was a shift in the roles of autonomy in Frederick over the course of the three school years of the pandemic that reflected varying degrees of bounded and intertwined practice between the school CoPs and the district CoP. Principals described the brokering before the pandemic as a balanced negotiation between the school CoPs and the district CoPs, consisting of equal parts bridging and buffering, both intertwined and bounded. Principals and district administrators described a swing towards principal autonomy, or more bounded rather than intertwined practice, with the onset of the crisis in the spring of 2020. In 2020-2021, both principals and district leaders described intertwined practice, with multiple examples of bridging between the school CoP and the district CoP. In 2021-2022, both district administrators and principals described a pendulum swing towards district control and away from principal autonomy. Some principals resisted the degree to which learning and practice were being intertwined in Frederick, particularly through the Blended Learning and Hope and Healing initiatives. Two principals expressed a more nuanced view, expressing the positives in addition to the challenges of this calibration. These principals appreciated the development of "common language." In general, principals welcomed bridging related to mutual engagement and buffered district initiatives that impinged on school control of Professional Learning Time.

Limitations

This qualitative, single-case study examined what professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district and how the learning of instructional leaders in a district is bounded and/or intertwined. Though our group and individual studies add to the body of research, limitations exist.

The most prominent limitation of the study is that research occurred during a global pandemic, and COVID-related implications informed every aspect of our data collection. Initiatives around professional learning that had begun prior to COVID were in some cases put on hold to prioritize pandemic-related demands. Because it was dependent on local health metrics and subsequent health and safety guidelines, our in-person access to the district was limited. Although we were able to conduct over 20 interviews, only seven were in person. We also did not have the opportunity to do many observations of practice in schools, which was part of our original study design. However, we also believe we turned this limitation into a strength, as our study made the crisis a focal point of our inquiry.

We note some additional limitations to our study. While our study included representation from the district and K-12 positions, the principal participant sample was limited, in part, due to additional increased work duties brought on by COVID. We interviewed one middle school principal; all other middle and high school principals were unavailable. Elementary principals were thus overrepresented in the study. In addition, the study was conducted over a six month period, limiting the scope of what was studied. If time were not a constraint, longitudinal research would reveal a longer-term body of data to analyze over several years. Finally, our study was limited by context. We studied a medium-sized urban school district in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are designated high needs. Thus, our findings may have limited application to districts with different socio-cultural or demographic contexts.

Implications

Our research team found three needs that emerged during the COVID-19 extended crisis: innovation, social emotional well being, and designing for professional learning. Within these three needs, we also identified tensions that emerged. Within the need for innovation, we found a tension between centralized initiatives and school-based autonomy. Within the need for social emotional well being, we identified a tension between high expectations and compassion, what many in the district referred to as "grace." Finally, within the need to design professional learning, we found a tension between asynchronous structures that fostered independent learning and structures that emphasized learning in and amongst other professionals. We came to understand these tensions as falling along a continuum. Thus, the primary implication of our study is for districts facing crisis to remain mindful of these tensions and seek to address needs with a balanced approach. In our discussion below, we apply this to policy, practice, and future research.

Innovation: Centralized Initiatives versus Autonomy

On one end of the continuum of innovation, our research team found district leadership attempting to bring cohesion to Frederick during the crisis by introducing new shared repertoire, namely Blended Learning, and by maintaining a focus on already existing joint enterprise, namely curriculum pacing maps and identified priority standards. Some principals appreciated the district unity in this moment of crisis.

However, many principals resisted these attempts at district-driven calibration, particularly in the third year of the pandemic. In addition, it seemed that Frederick relied to a certain extent on principals who had prior experience with autonomy to innovate, particularly at the onset of the crisis.

As an implication for practice and policy, Frederick and other districts facing crisis might consider the balance between district control and principal ownership. As school-based leaders sought to manage the impacts of the crisis on their individual school CoPs, many principals identified autonomy as an important element of their response. For example, four principals talked about mitigating the pacing of curriculum maps at the school level in response to student and teacher needs.

In addition, in order to prepare for a crisis, districts might consider creating opportunities for principals to practice autonomy. As stated above, Frederick's superintendent made the point that his views on principal autonomy were purposely opaque and that the granting of autonomy should be "a process not an event." There could be advantages to making that process, the when's, why's and circumstances of principal autonomy, more transparent and accessible so that more principals can develop the enterprising skills that were clearly valuable during this crisis. Relatedly, districts might consider the need for developmental supervision of teachers, building them to be more autonomous in their professionalism as well. In short, scaffolding autonomy for educators may be an effective strategy to prepare for crisis.

Finally, instructional leadership can be strengthened by the district strategically balancing opportunities for both central control and autonomy. Research suggests that the organization of the district has a direct impact on the roles of autonomy (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Charochak, 2018). It is possible that fully supporting principal autonomy would require fundamental changes to the district CoP. Further research could explore the affordances and constraints of such a district structure.

Social Emotional Well-being: High Expectations versus Grace

Our findings suggest districts recovering from the pandemic need to make some strategic decisions about the pace of instruction. As in many districts across the Commonwealth, educators in Frederick were concerned about "learning loss" as a result of the pandemic and wished to address perceived gaps in learning. At the same time, principals acknowledged that teachers also had social emotional needs that emerged as a result of the pandemic, and principals were concerned about "pushing" too hard. When talking about balancing "grace," or compassion, with urgency, some principals talked about their belief in their agency given the specific context of their school, particularly their being in a position to best judge how much to push the teachers, and their preference to work collaboratively with teachers to adjust instructional goals.

This dynamic speaks to a tension the superintendent raised: When is offering grace as an instructional leader a necessary response, a reflection of the mutual engagement of the CoP, and when does it mean lowering expectations for joint enterprise? Going forward in their recovery from the pandemic, school districts will need to come to a consensus about how, if at all, to adjust the pace of instruction and who is in the best position to make the decisions about adjustment.

Another consistent theme in our research was the limited resource of time to address these tensions. Demands on school and district leadership expand exponentially during a crisis (Hannah et al., 2009). We found that for principals in our study, increased management responsibilities consistently impinged upon their instructional leadership. Further research might explore how MILs could fill the gap in practice. Further research might explore how to best prioritize competing pressures in crisis and how to do so effectively and efficiently.

Designing for Professional Learning: Independent versus Social Learning

Professional learning opportunities are always important, but particularly critical during crisis. Educators need to be able to respond to the myriad needs that emerge during crises, and

these needs require educators to learn and to adapt their practice. Learning within Frederick reflects both independent and collaborative learning opportunities.

Use of technology emerged as a means for independent learning, and the district seized that opportunity with individual modules for Blended Learning. There were several benefits of this model. Flexibility was one of the benefits as it allowed teachers to complete modules at a time that was most convenient for them. Another benefit included increased differentiation of professional learning. This differentiation allowed a variety of topics to be presented to educators and afforded them a choice. It also was an opportunity for district leadership to model for teachers the mode of instruction teachers would then use with students. Due to COVID-19 requiring social distancing and limiting the district's ability to bring large groups of educators together, technology-based learning was a way to ensure that learning did not cease during the crisis, but instead would continue in a new format.

However, our research found that though the independent technology-based learning opportunities provided benefits, there was also a strong desire for opportunities to learn together. Humans learn and develop behaviors by interacting with others (Bandura, 1977). Teachers, MILs, and principals identified the lack of mutual engagement due to asynchronous learning as a detriment to shared understanding, investment, and consistent implementation.

If a district decides to pursue an asynchronous professional learning structure such as Blended Learning, leaders must be intentional and balance independent learning with opportunities for educators to collaborate and learn with and through each other to maximize the benefits of CoP membership. Otherwise, learning will continue to occur in isolation, diminishing the opportunity to import and export learning through brokering which allows for best practices to develop in and across CoPs over time.

Our findings suggest the optimal balance of independent and collaborative learning may be an area for further research. Namely, a study could be done on how learning through the use of technology contributes to both individual and to social collaborative structures. As we detailed in Chapter One, professional learning during a crisis is critical to building capacity for practices that meet the needs of students and create sustained improvement (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Smith & Riley 2012; Mutch 2015). Crises spur rapid social change, and rapid social change requires efficient adult learning (Tusting & Barton, 2003). Research further establishes that professional learning that capitalizes on interactions in and amongst educators maximizes its impact (Bannister, 2015) and that collaborative professional learning experiences in particular lead to shifts in practice (Bruce, 2010; Slavit et al., 2011). Our research could shed light on the benefits of independent learning and the frequency with which collaborative learning should supplement independent learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study investigated professional learning and instructional leadership by understanding a district as a CoP through individual layers within the organization. Our aim was to understand the interactions and interdependencies among the learning experiences of different educators within a district responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in other words how learning and instructional leadership are bounded (have defined boundaries) and intertwined (have interconnection across boundaries). Each crisis is unique, and we hope that educators will never again face the depth of challenge COVID-19 presented them. However, the lessons of COVID-19 could be useful to districts facing crises in the future.

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Appendix A: Common Principal Interview Protocol

Principal Leader Interview Questions
~ 45 Minutes

1. **My first set of questions are about how you are thinking about instruction right now in your school [20 minutes]**
   - **What are the instructional priorities in your school right now?**
     - How were those priorities decided?
     - How much was it a school-based decision vs a district decision?
   - **Can you give me an example of a tool or language you use in your school to talk about instruction?**
     - How shared/universal is that tool or language in your school?
     - Is it used in other schools in the district?
   - **We're interested in how educators in your school interact around instruction**
     - Structures? Common Planning?
     - How would you describe instructional leadership in your school?
     - Who are your strong instructional leaders, what roles are they in?
   - **We're interested in how educators in this district collaborate, particularly with respect to instruction**
     - Do you collaborate with other principals in the district?
     - How if at all do teachers from your school collaborate with teachers from other schools?
     - How if at all do you and your teachers collaborate with folks from central office?
   - **How if at all has COVID-19 changed your conversations around instruction?**

2. **My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction [20 minutes]**
   - **How would you describe your role in instructional leadership?**
   - **How have you learned to be an instructional leader?**
     - Has there been anything in particular you have learned during COVID-19 about instructional leadership?
   - **We're interested in how the district shares control and decision making around instruction with principals.**
     - Can you tell me about a recent instance where you felt you had autonomy as an instructional leader?
     - Do you think your autonomy has increased or decreased since COVID-19? In what ways?
     - How connected do you feel to the district's or the superintendent's priorities?

    - Tell me about your relationship with the district? Do you feel that's the right level/type of relationship with the district? Do you think it should be more/less/different?
- **In what ways do you contribute to the success of the district?**
    - How do you know your contributions are valued?
- **In your opinion, what kind of teacher learning results in changed practice?**
    - How do you support or contribute to teacher learning?

Appendix B: Superintendent Interview Protocol

My first set of questions are about instructional leadership...

1. What are the/your instructional priorities right now? How were those priorities decided?
2. Can you give me an example of any particular tools or protocols or particular language you use in this district to talk about instruction?
3. Can you please describe how the district vision and goals are established and communicated?
    a. Regarding the goal setting process, how does this work among the different layers of the organization? How do you generate investment from principals and others in carrying out their part of the district's goals?
4. We're interested in how educators in the district interact around instruction. Can you describe how [bulleted list] interact around instructional priorities?
    - Teachers and principals
    - Middle level leaders (such as assistant principals, department heads) and teachers
    - Principals and central office staff
5. Please describe how the district knows if students are improving.

My next set of questions are about interactions with principals...

6. In what ways do you develop your principals (how do you *build capacity* and *generate will*)?
7. What strategies did you use specifically during COVID and this year to *generate will* and make principals "want" to be part of the Lynn family?
8. What has been your biggest leadership challenge in supporting principals during this time of crisis? Please explain what additional support(s) you felt principals needed during COVID-19 and how you assisted them?
9. In what ways do principals contribute to the success of the district? How do principals know their contributions are valued?
10. What do you think is the right level of autonomy for principals and why? How, if at all, do you provide autonomy for principals?
11. What are the characteristics you would use to describe the ideal relationship between the district and building leaders?
12. Can you think of the principal that you have the strongest relationship with and describe why it is strong?

Appendix C: Middle-level Instructional Leader Interview Protocol

Name, professional title, pronouns or anything else you'd like me to know about you

Two sets of questions. First set of questions are about how you are thinking about instruction right now in your school/district. [20 minutes]

- What is your professional title, pronouns or anything else you'd like me to know about you?
- What are the instructional priorities in your school/district right now? How were those priorities decided?
- Can you give me an example of a tool or language you use in your school/district to talk about instruction?
- Who would you consider to be a strong instructional leader, what roles are they in? Why do you consider them strong instructional leaders?
- We're interested in how educators in this district collaborate, particularly with respect to instruction. How do you as a MIL collaborate with other MILs? Who is your core?
- How if at all has COVID-19 changed your conversations around instruction?

My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction [20 minutes]

- How have you learned to be an instructional leader?
- How do you define instructional leadership?
- Can you tell me about a recent instance where you felt you had autonomy as an instructional leader? Do you think your autonomy has increased or decreased since COVID-19? In what ways?
- How connected do you feel to the district's priorities?
- In what ways do you as a MIL contribute to the success of the district? How do you know your contributions are valued?
- How can Lynn improve instructional leadership through the use of Middle-level Instructional Leaders?

Appendix D: Teacher Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about your role? Purpose? Typical day? Who evaluates you?
2. What are your instructional priorities right now? How were those priorities decided?
3. We are interested in how different roles collaborate.
    a. Who do you collaborate with within the school?
    b. Who do you collaborate with within the district?
    c. How much influence does the principal have with your role?
    d. How much influence does the district have with your role?
4. Can you give me an example of any particular tools or protocols or particular language you use in this school or district to talk about instruction?

Interview Questions:

1. How has your teaching changed during your career?
2. What has impacted those changes?
3. How would you describe the school in terms of adult learning?
4. What have your experiences with professional learning been like?
    a. Tell me about PLT time and the early release days
5. What contributes to your engagement with learning? What turns you off?
6. How does your principal support adult learning?
7. How, if at all, has your practice changed since the pandemic?
    a. Are there any instructional changes you have made due to the pandemic that you will maintain?

Appendix E: Interview Consent Form

Boston College Consent Form
Boston College Lynch School of Education
Informed Consent to be in study Bounded & Intertwined - Professional Learning and Instructional Leadership During COVID-19
Researcher: Sara Hosmer, Anne Clark, Meredith Erickson, Mario Pires
Adult Consent Form

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. You were chosen to be in the study because **you have a leadership position within Lynn Public Schools**. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to **understand how educators engage in instructional leadership within the district.** If you choose to participate, you will be asked to **interview** or to be observed. Interviews will take about **45 minutes.**
- The research team will share findings with the superintendent. The information you share will be anonymous.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate and you can stop at any time.
- Potential risks from this research include a breach of confidentiality that could lead to a negative impact on subjects' psychological, social, or economic status. The steps we will take to minimize this risk are outlined below.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand **how educators engage in social learning within the district**. The total number of people in this study is expected to be at most **50.**

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to **participate in an interview between August 1st and December 31st, 2021, in a confidential space designated within your district (Lynn Public Schools). Audio/video recordings will be used**. We expect the interview to take about **45 minutes**.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, **your anonymized responses will allow us to deduct findings about how professional learning is bounded and intertwined within a school district, contributing to the future of the field we work in.** We want to learn from your time and energy spent participating.

What risks might result from being in this study?

As stated above, potential risks include a breach of confidentiality that could lead to a negative impact on subjects' psychological, social, or economic status. Examples of this can include an individual's perspective being identifiable, and this having an impact on one's future employment.

How will we protect your information?

In order to minimize the risk with participating in this study, the research team is committing to the following:

- All names, including school names and individual names, will be replaced with pseudonyms.
- All records of this study will be kept private. Hard copies of evidence will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file.
- We will assign to each participant a unique, coded identifier that will be used in place of actual identifiers. We will separately maintain a record that links each participant's coded identifier to his or her actual name, but this separate record will not include research data.
- Only members of the research team will have access to audio or video tape recordings during the study. Following the study, hard copy documents will be destroyed by a shredder and electronic data will be permanently erased.

The results of this study may be published or presented publicly. The Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. State or federal laws or court orders may also require that information from your research study records be released. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will not keep your research data. We will not share your research data. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

There will be no compensation for participation.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There is no cost to you.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, please inform the interviewer at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.

Getting Dismissed from the Study

The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time if it is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted) or the study sponsor decides to end the study.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact any of the following researchers:

Sara Hosmer

Anne Clark

Meredith Erickson

Mario Pires

Faculty Advisory: Martin Scanlan

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Boston College
Office for Research Protections
Phone: (617) 552-4778
Email: irb@bc.edu

Your Consent

Please state the following: I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Appendix F: Observation Analysis Protocol

Date:
Time Start:
Time End:
Location:

Participants:

Description of Activity (what is being observed):

Descriptive notes of the room and surroundings taken prior to the start of the event:

Component	Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
❑ Description of participant ❑ Description of activity ❑ Interaction ❑ Behaviors ❑ Unplanned event ❑ Specific comment/quote ❑ Non-verbal behavior ❑ Physical setting		
❑ Description of participant ❑ Description of activity ❑ Interaction ❑ Behaviors ❑ Unplanned event ❑ Specific comment/quote ❑ Non-verbal behavior ❑ Physical setting		

❑ **Description of participant** ❑ **Description of activity** ❑ **Interaction** ❑ **Behaviors** ❑ **Unplanned event** ❑ **Specific comment/quote** ❑ **Non-verbal behavior** ❑ **Physical setting**		

Appendix G: Common Document Review Protocol

Item Name:
Date of Publication:
Format:
Author:
Intended Audience:

Component	Details	Reflective Notes
❑ Description of message ❑ Description of tone or style ❑ Word choice ❑ Use of data ❑ Reference to other document		
❑ Description of message ❑ Description of tone or style ❑ Word choice ❑ Use of data ❑ Reference to other document		
❑ Description of message ❑ Description of tone or style ❑ Word choice ❑ Use of data ❑ Reference to other document		

Appendix H: A-Priori Codes

Code	Example	Source/Justification
Joint Enterprise	An instance where there is an articulated collective understanding of what the community is about and its purpose	Wenger/ CoP
Mutual Engagement	An instance that reveals interactions and relationships, for example an instance of receiving or giving help	Wenger/ CoP
Shared Repertoire	A subject articulates histories, tools, or ways of communicating and learning as unique to a particular community	Wenger/ CoP
Practice: Learning Partnerships	A subject describes a practice of a middle level instructional leader or describes experiences of collaboration and convening	Wenger/ CoP
Learning Governance:	Stewardship [A subject describes experiences where there are concerted efforts to move a social system in a given direction] or Emergence [A subject describes experiences whereby decision and/or governance bubbles up from a distributed system of interactions]	Wenger/ CoP
Power: Vertical Accountability	A subject describes experiences where traditional hierarchies and decisional authority are evident	Wenger/ CoP
Power: Horizontal Accountability	A subject describes evidence of experiences where engagement there is in joint activities, negotiation of mutual relevance, and commitment to collective learning	Wenger/ CoP
Identity: Learning Citizenship	A subject describes evidence of their identity in the community, how they contribute to the community, explicit ways that leaders in the organization design for or experience innovation, motivation, and commitment	Wenger/ CoP

Appendix I: Four Learning Capabilities Detailed Description (Wenger, 2010)

Learning Capability	Description	Questions to consider
Partnerships	● Anchored in a mutual recognition as potential learning partners ● Partnership may be collaborative and harmonious or it may be tempestuous and full of conflicts ● Focuses on the discipline of domain, community, practice, and convening	● What is our partnership about? ● What is our learning agenda? ● How do we manage the boundaries of the community? ● What should participants do together to learn and benefit from the partnership?
Learning Governance: Stewardship and Emergence	● The process by which a social system becomes a learning system: It is learning that drives governance. ● Must reflect the complementary character of network and community structuring ● The process of seeking agreement and alignment across a social system ● May bubble up from a distributed system of interactions involving local decisions	● Who are the players that determine learning objectives?
Power: Vertical and Horizontal Accountability	● Includes two axes of accountability ● Vertical accountability: traditional hierarchies, decisional authority, the management of resources, bureaucracies, policies and regulations, accounting, prescriptions, and audit inspections ● Horizontal accountability: engagement in joint activities, negotiation of mutual relevance, standards of practice, peer recognition, identity and reputation, and commitment to collective learning ● Goal is to increase the visibility and integration between horizontal and vertical structures	● What vertical and horizontal accountability structures impact learning? ● How are vertical and horizontal accountability structures integrated?
Citizenship	● Refers to the ethics of how we invest our identities as we travel through the landscapes of practice	● How does the member contribute to the communities they belong

	● Refers to the personal side of a social discipline of learning	or could belong to? ● How does the member act as a learning citizen within the CoP?